



The UNDEAD KING'S REIGN of PEACE

1

SAKUMA SASAKI

Illustration by
EISHI HAYAMA





The UNDEAD
KING'S
REIGN of
PEACE



**Terios**

An Undead King feared by all. Aspires to create a world where people can live peacefully.

**Mira**

A girl saved by Terios. Intelligent and talented at magic.



"How do you think we should **defeat the goblins** hiding inside?"



"Good, that's not a bad idea. However, we lack the **manpower** to take shifts watching the cave, and it will take time for the goblins to **run out of food**. That strategy isn't ideal when you're **short on numbers or in a hurry**."



"Okay, then we'll need to think of a way to make the goblins **come out quickly**..."



"Nope, unfortunately that's only **two points** for you. The goblins know the inside of this cave like the backs of their hands. It wouldn't be wise to just waltz into their home base."



"There are a few options available, but I've got **just the thing** this time."



"If we use **that**..."



"Ummm, if we can't go inside, then what about **waiting for them to come out**?"

"We can suffocate them with **poisonous fumes**."



“Erupt, Vulcanus!”

The white blade responded to Diné's call and burned a bright red. Since the weapon emitted enough heat to evaporate magma, she swung it at the monster's huge body.



Diné

A holy knight descended
from the God of Fire.

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NEW YORK

Copyright

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SAKUMA SASAKI

TRANSLATION BY JORDAN TAYLOR | COVER ART BY EISHI HAYAMA

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Illustration: Eishi Hayama



PROLOGUE | The Night She Met Death

Death—that which comes to all living things without discrimination, the end of life.

Mira, a white-haired village girl just over twelve years old, was no exception.

“Huff, huff...”

She lay incapacitated on a crude bed in a pitch-black room, her breathing labored. Several green, almost mold-like blotches covered her scrawny body.

It was the green rot, a disease that first manifested as green splotches on the skin. As it progressed, extreme fever and pain drained the victim’s energy until their body finally rotted away and expired.

So ruthless was the illness that only the most powerful healers could cure it, and because it spread through the air, many feared they would contract it.

“Momma...” Mira cried for help in her delirium.

But no one came to care for her.

A few days earlier, her mother had told her she was heading to the city to seek help. She left, never to return.

Mira hadn’t been abandoned. Her mother had pushed her own disease-ravaged body to its limits in the hopes of finding someone who could save her daughter, but the royal family’s soldiers had killed her on the way, dispatched her to prevent the spread of the disease.

This was the Erythron Kingdom, a small country with a population of less than a hundred thousand. They lacked magic users skilled enough to cure the green rot and so had no recourse but to kill anyone suspected of carrying the disease to reduce the terrible loss of life.

Obviously, a mere village girl like Mira had no way of knowing any of that. She didn’t even know that her mother had already departed for the afterlife. All she knew was that extreme pain continued to gnaw at her.

“Somebody...”

Not a single villager rushed to her side as she begged for help.

The green rot had already devastated the populace of Krio Village, once home to at least eighty people. Now there was no one left to help her.

The frail elders had been first to succumb. Next, the royal military had killed the local leaders who'd gone for help. The younger villagers who'd heard about that incident had fled into the forests to escape but had died of starvation or been attacked by ravenous wild animals or wicked monsters, never to be seen again.

Some had been so consumed by despair that they'd taken their own lives. Parents had toiled to care for their sick families, but they'd expired before long as well. In the end, only children, like Mira, remained, their youthful vitality prolonging their suffering.

By the time the moon fell and the sun showed its face, most of them would have breathed their last.

"I can't..."

Mira gripped the bed weakly, delirious from pain and fever. What little strength left in her hands came from the fear of her looming demise—or perhaps the agony of knowing she could do nothing to prevent it.

Just as her eyes began to shut for the last time, the front door creaked open.

"Momma...?"

Tears spilled from her eyes, and she summoned her remaining strength to turn toward the entrance.

But what she saw there, wreathed in the pale moonlight, was not the figure of her mother, for whom she waited.

It wasn't even human. If you had only a single word to describe it, you might say that death itself stood there.

Cloaked in a black robe that melted into the darkness of night, only its white head stood out clearly. There were no eyes on that face, no nose, lips, ears, eyebrows, or even hair.

It was a bleach-white skeleton. This lifeless symbol of death gazed at Mira

with eyes like pale-blue flames set in its sockets.

“Ahhh...”

Mira sighed feebly in understanding. The time had come for her to leave this world.

The skeleton moved, its robe fluttering around it. It wasn't carrying a large scythe, but it looked every bit the part of the reaper from the stories Mira had been told. That's why she wasn't frightened when it walked all the way up to her pillow. Rather, she smiled happily.

“Kill me.”

She begged for an end to her suffering in a voice so clear she surprised herself.

Harvesting human souls and carrying them to the afterlife was the reaper's responsibility. Surely it would put her out of her misery.

But the skeleton shook its head in response to Mira's request, refusing.

“I am terribly sorry, but I've sworn to never take a human life again.” The skeleton's white teeth clacked as it informed her in a deep, calm male voice.

“...Why?” asked Mira, clinging on.

He didn't respond. Instead, he slipped a hand behind her back and raised her into a sitting position. Then he pulled a small bottle from thin air, removed the stopper, and brought the bottle to Mira's lips.

“Drink,” he commanded, tilting the bottle and pouring a bitter liquid into Mira's mouth.

Lacking the strength to resist, she gulped it down. At this, he nodded in satisfaction and then laid her back on the bed.

“You'll be all right from here on. Your fever and pain will be gone by morning.”

“Huh?!” Mira cried out loudly, surprised that she had this much strength left.

She turned her attention to her body again and noticed a slowly growing warmth in her stomach, perhaps from the liquid the skeleton had made her

drink. But it wasn't a bad feeling. In fact, it was refreshing, like a gentle flame was purifying the decay from the green rot.

"What was that...?"

"A potion created from the bone marrow of a dragon. Even the blotches will fade from your skin in a few days."

Mira was dumbfounded. The skeleton gently stroked her head with a hand that was literally bony.

All at once, sleep overtook her. But it was not the eternal sleep that had threatened her moments before; rather, it was a gentle sleep that promised she would wake again.

"Why did you save me?"

No sooner had the words escaped her mouth than she slipped into the world of dreams.



When she was younger, Mira hadn't minded being stuck in bed with a cold. Though not being able to play outside with everyone had been sad, and she had felt guilty about not doing any chores, she always had one thing look forward to.

"Okay, here's your medicine."

Her mother brought a steaming wooden cup to Mira in bed.

Inside was powdered chamomile dissolved in hot water. It had a particular smell, and Mira disliked the taste.

"It's yucky. I don't want it."

"Don't be so stubborn."

Her mother stroked Mira's head even as she lightly scolded her for refusing the medicinal drink.

"If you drink it all up, I'll let you have a spoonful of honey."

"Really?!"

As if on cue, her eyes shone.

Normally, something so sweet and precious was reserved for consumption only during the spring and fall festivals. The chance to enjoy even just one spoonful made drinking the disgusting medicine easy.

“Definitely! Hmm, but if you’re that full of energy, maybe you don’t need the medicine or the honey?”

Mira quickly snatched the cup from her mother, who was teasing her for forgetting her fever and getting so excited.

She blew on the hot water to cool it, then managed to power through the strong bitterness and finish it off.

“Blegh...”

“Good job, Mira.”

She scrunched up her face, and her mother stuck a spoon of the shiny golden honey she had been waiting for into her mouth.

Sweetness exploded, washing away the bitterness of the medicine that had tainted her tongue.

“Mmmmm... I’m glad I caught a cold.”

“The things this child says.”

Smiling at her daughter wearing her heart on her sleeve, her mother poked Mira’s forehead.

Though raising her daughter by herself meant that she was usually busy, Mira’s mother always stayed by her side to care for her when she was sick.

The sweetness of the honey made that time together all the sweeter.

“...Momma.”

The dream from which Mira woke was so nostalgic and gentle that it made tears flow from her eyes, which were now fixed on a ceiling, one she recognized.

“Is this the village chief’s house?”

Confused, she got up and looked around. A number of simple hay beds were laid out in the large room, and on them slept her friends, the other village

children.

“Everyone!”

Mira rushed in a panic to inspect each of the sleeping children’s bodies. There were still faint, green blotches on their skin, but their breathing was stable, and they looked calm as they slept.

“Thank goodness...”

She let out a sigh of relief and sat down. They must have all been given that strange liquid—the potion—and had their lives saved.

“That’s right; who was that person?”

That walking skeleton, the one like the grim reaper. Assuming she hadn’t been hallucinating on her deathbed, he was undoubtedly the person who had saved their lives.

“Or the skeleton who saved our lives?”

Puzzled, Mira thought it over. He wasn’t human. He must be an undead, a type of monster the village elders would talk about.

She would soon learn that he was, in fact, the incredibly dangerous Undead King, an undead with intelligence equal to or above that of humans, with enough magical skill at his command to level an entire mountain.

“But I was always told to book it if I ever saw a monster, because they’re unpredictable and attack people...”

She’d never once heard about a monster saving people instead.

While she sat there confused, the other children started to wake, perhaps roused by Mira talking to herself.

“Hmm, Mira?”

“Huh? I thought I was a goner...”

“It doesn’t hurt. What happened?”

Unlike Mira, it seemed the other children had been unconscious and didn’t remember the skeleton making them drink the medicine. They were all baffled to be still alive.

Even so, huge tears spilled from the corners of Mira's eyes at the sight of her friends in good health.

"Thank god you were all saved."

"Hey, hey, don't go crying now."

Torio, a boy the same age as Mira, patted her shoulder and tried to cheer her up.

"Yeah, thanks."

"S-sure."

Mira wiped her eyes and smiled, and Torio blushed and looked away.

Amid all this happiness, one girl suddenly murmured, "Hey, what about Mommy and Daddy?"

"Urgh!"

Mira's expression clouded over, and she fell silent. There was likely no one else alive besides the nine children in that room.

That meant the girl's parents, as well as the other children's parents, siblings, and even Mira's mother, were gone.

But the truth was too terrifying to admit. Unable to dodge the question, she instead sat there opening and closing her mouth wordlessly. Just then, the door suddenly opened, and the black-robed skeleton appeared.

"Eek!"

"A m-monster?!"

The other children screamed and ran to the far corners of the room. They clearly hadn't seen him before.

"Um..."

At a loss, Mira choked on her words. She wanted to stand up for the person who had saved their lives, but she didn't think the other children would believe her at all.

Still, she couldn't just let things go on like this.

“Everyone, it’s okay. Calm down,” she said half-heartedly, not believing it would work. Just as she had started speaking, her stomach let out a cute little gurgle.

“Ah...”

Now that she thought about it, she had spent the past few days in bed, and there hadn’t been anyone to take care of her. Save for the water and honey that her mother left beside her pillow, she’d had nothing to eat or drink the entire time.

She looked down at her body again and saw she was as thin as a skeleton. If the potion the skeleton made her drink hadn’t worked, she probably wouldn’t even be able to speak right now.

“I’m hungry...”

The other children sat down, the sound of Mira’s growling stomach reminding them all of their own hunger.

The skeleton had been watching in silence, but now he clicked his white teeth in a smile.

“Your hunger is proof that you still live. All right now, I’ve made some porridge for you. Please come along, everyone.”

He waved his hand, urging the children to follow.

“.....”

All the children remained silent, confused by the terrifying reaper-like visage with its incongruent kindness and politeness.

Out of all of them, Mira was the first to cave to the smell of the porridge floating in from the hallway. Before she realized it, she was swallowing back drool and standing to follow.

“Hey, watch out!”

“It’s all right.”

Torio grabbed Mira’s hand to try to stop her, but she smiled back calmly.

“This...uh, nice man (?) could have killed us already if he wanted to.”

It seemed peering into the abyss of death had granted her a strange kind of courage.

Based on the skeleton's low voice, she was certain he was a man, but she had no idea how old he was and therefore wasn't sure how to address him. Insisting it was safe, she pulled on Torio's hand instead.

She turned back to the skeleton.

"You won't kill us, will you?" she asked.

At this, the skeleton opened the front of his robe to show his empty abdomen, and he laughed. "I'm not in the habit of fattening up children to eat them. Don't you worry."

"Hee-hee."

Mira wiped away a tear even as she chuckled, remembering how her mother had told similar fairy tales. She waved at the other children, who were frozen in uncertainty.

"C'mon. It'd be pretty stupid to die of hunger after getting saved."

In fact, it would be inexcusable, considering all the villagers who hadn't been so lucky.

Mira defiantly walked into the hall with the skeleton. Unable to beat back their appetites, the other children followed along, albeit hesitantly.

The skeleton led the children into the living room. Their village was so small that it didn't have an inn. Instead, they used this room to double as lodging for any visitors they might have. For that reason, the village chief's living room was larger than any other house's and was furnished with a large table.

Atop it now sat bowls of delicious steaming porridge, exactly enough for the children.

"Yay!"

"I do apologize, but as I lack a tongue, I cannot guarantee it will be to your taste."

The skeleton showed them his empty mouth, but the starving children didn't

listen.

Their previous suspicion had completely disappeared in the face of their overpowering hunger. They all reached for the dishes of porridge in front of them.

“Ah, ah, it’s hot!”

“No need to rush. There’s plenty more left.”

He smiled as the children wolfed down the food. The blue fire that made up his eyes narrowed in a smile, and he brought along a pot holding seconds.

Mira looked at him sideways as she shoveled porridge into her mouth.

“...Yummy.”

There was perhaps no seasoning more delicious than an empty belly. The porridge was bland, nothing more than wheat boiled in water, but at that moment, it was more delicious than freshly baked bread or roast chicken. Before she realized it, she was crying.

After the children had multiple helpings, the skeleton decided that their stomachs were most likely feeling better. He slowly started to speak.

“Well then, I suppose I should start with an introduction. My name is... Huh, what was it again?”

“Huh?”

The skeleton tilted his head in confusion, and Mira copied his motion exactly.

She felt that maybe he was cracking a joke to make them feel more at ease, but she also sensed a sort of seriousness, like he hadn’t been called by his name in so many years that he had honestly forgotten it. She couldn’t very well poke at him with an insensitive question.

In place of Mira and the other children, a woman’s voice broke the silence first.

“Oh my, it must be vexing losing your marbles as you get older.”

“Who’s that?!”

The children jumped and looked around as a black shadow leaped onto the

table.

It had glossy black fur and golden eyes like moons—

“Did that kitty talk?” asked Mira.

“If a skeleton can talk, then surely a cat can, too,” replied the black cat, who’d suddenly appeared as Mira blinked in surprise. The cat curled up on top of the table.

Despite having never once lost his gentle demeanor before this, the skeleton spat at the cat upon seeing it.

“Aren’t you the one who should be concerned about dementia?”

“Do you see this young and lively body or are your eyes rotten? Oh, my bad. You don’t even have eyes left to rot.”

While the skeleton still spoke politely, he and the cat glared at each other, sparks flying.

Mira realized the other children were scared by the two of them, so she hesitantly called to them.

“Ummm...”

“My apologies. Please pay her no mind.”

“He’s right—I’m just a spectator. Don’t mind me.”

“Uh-huh...”

She couldn’t tell if they were on good terms or not, so she could only respond vaguely to the strange skeleton and cat.

While she did that, the skeleton turned the conversation back to its original course.

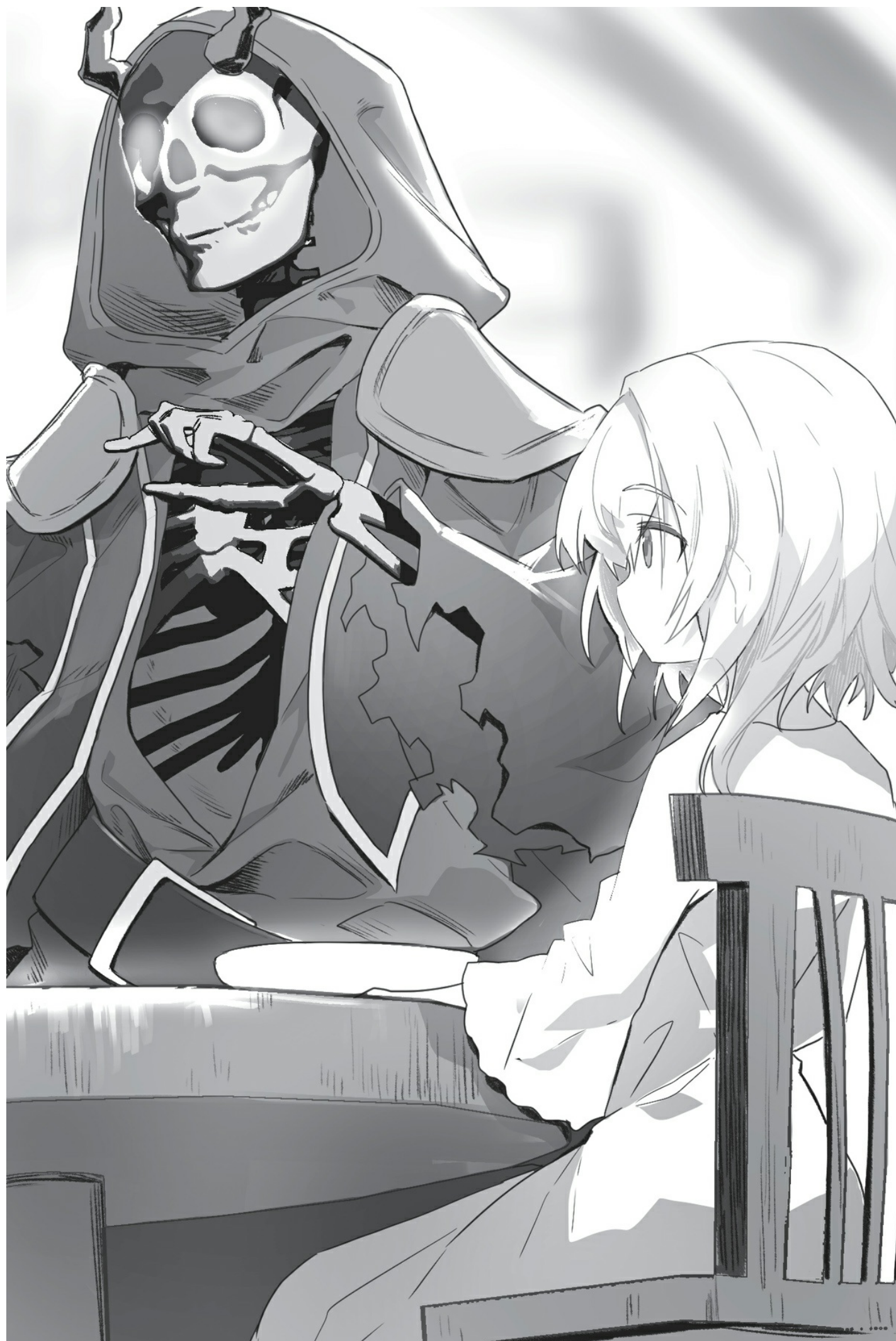
“About my name... Let’s just go with Terios for now.”

For all they knew, it could have been a fake name he came up with on the spot, but he didn’t give them any time to question it. Instead, the skeleton, now Terios, pushed on with what he was saying.

“People succumb to famine and war every day.”

Mira and the other children had almost been among them. In this world, death was as close as your next-door neighbor.

“However, I cannot abide it. I wish to create a peaceful world where people don’t perish before their time, where they aren’t killed in battle.”



It was almost like some sort of bad joke that this skeleton, the spitting image of a reaper, the very symbol of death, would want a world where no one died unnecessarily.

But Terios was earnest as he continued his declaration to the children.

“I will, without fail, bring to life a peaceful world that will continue for a millennium. That’s why I would like you all to feel at ease.”

He smiled with a clack of his teeth.

Yet, the dream he spoke of was far too grand for Mira and the other children to keep up with. All they could do was sit there in bewilderment, their mouths hanging open.

“A peaceful world that continues for a thousand years...”

While they weren’t rich, their lives had been calm and without strife. But the village life they thought would continue forever had quickly crumbled in the face of disease.

Mira had been lucky; her life had been saved. But even if she returned to her previous life, she would be plagued with fear and uncertainty, a fear that everything might collapse without warning.

That’s why Terios’s vision of nigh eternal peace sounded so amazing.

“How wonderful.”

“Yes, that would indeed be a wonderful world.”

Terios smiled back, jaw clicking, as the words tumbled from Mira’s mouth.

This was a moment she would remember until the day she died—the moment her fate crossed with that of the Undead King.



CHAPTER 1 | Drastic Times Call For Drastic Skeletons

After Terios finished his introduction, he sat quietly in his seat while the children told him their names.

“I will finish cleaning up. Please go have a rest in bed.”

Though the potion had cured the disease and their empty stomachs were now filled with porridge, their bodies were thin and frail after not eating anything for days. They weren't fully recovered.

In fact, the children were already rubbing their eyes sleepily, their bodies calling out for rest despite the fact that they had just woken up.

“Thank you. We'll go sleep.”

Far from being afraid of Terios, the beautiful, if gaunt, white-haired girl seemed somewhat friendly toward him because she had been conscious when he saved her. She bowed her head, then pushed the other children's backs to urge them to the bedroom.

Terios watched them go, then opened the front door and stepped outside.

“I saved nine children. I suppose that is a lot, considering,” he muttered to himself, looking around the village.

Until a mere two weeks ago, this small farming village had carried on peacefully. Now it had transformed into a hell filled with countless green-spotted corpses. The corpses directly exposed to the early-summer sun were in horrific condition, rotting with insects writhing over them. He couldn't let the children see that.

“It's times like this when I'm glad I'm a skeleton.”

Terios's teeth chattered as he laughed. As was plain to see, he lacked both nose and stomach on top of being undead. The stench of the bodies would not cause him to vomit, nor did he risk contracting the disease.

“But...the green rot?”

He gathered the fallen bodies from the houses and carried them to an open

space that looked like a cemetery a little ways from the village, a finger on his chin as he thought.

The green rot spread through airborne transmission, and anyone infected died within ten days or so if they didn't receive treatment. It was one of the deadliest diseases around. However, because symptoms developed quickly after infection, people swiftly realized they were contagious and avoided spreading the ailment. On top of that, the pathogen had a fatal flaw: With a few extremely rare exceptions, it couldn't infect anything besides humans. For that reason—

“I thought I'd eradicated it two hundred years ago...”

“My, my, aren't you full of yourself?”

Out of nowhere, the black cat jumped on Terios's shoulder in reply to his conversation with himself.

“Don't you think a human trying to destroy a disease that's death incarnate is a bit like picking a fight with Pluto himself?”

“If that's what it takes to create a peaceful world, I will fight even the gods.”

“My, how scary.”

He spoke seriously, but the black cat wiggled her whiskers in a laugh.

Though his body should have lost all ability to feel pain, he felt a headache come on as he watched her.

“What do you want? If you're not busy, perhaps you could keep the children company.”

“They're all sleeping like the dead.”

“Please choose your words more carefully.”

If he had arrived only a few hours later, the children really would be dead. It was no laughing matter.

As Terios chided her, she smiled cruelly and said, “But it's a good thing.”

“What exactly?”

“Finding such a convenient village. Lady Luck must have blessed you indeed.”

“I’m sure you meant to say cursed,” he replied unhappily, finding the content of her joke too distasteful.

But the black cat didn’t relent.

“But isn’t it true? There’s no one better suited for you to bring into the fold than some poor children who were waiting for someone to save them from a horrible disease.”

“.....”

Terios shut his mouth. The black cat spoke the truth.

He needed people to accept his existence to bring about a peaceful world. But undead were normally seen as evil monsters, and he was an Undead King, a being powerful enough to destroy an entire country. Typically, it would be impossible to get people to accept someone like that.

But that was just it: It was only impossible under normal circumstances. Extreme situations were an entirely different story. When pushed to desperation, people might beg for salvation from anyone; whether from god or demon, they didn’t care. The weak might even cling to a wicked undead creature.

“I was thinking more along the lines of some citizens suffering extreme taxation from their lord.” Terios sighed.

Even he hadn’t foreseen stumbling upon a village on the brink of destruction from the green rot.

“It’s convenient indeed,” said Terios. “So convenient that people might falsely accuse me of spreading the green rot myself. If Lady Luck or whatever you say is truly involved, then I fear she’s toying with me.”

“Then how about you start over somewhere else?” suggested the black cat, but Terios shook his head after a moment of consideration.

“No. There is likely no location better suited for the start of my plan.”

They were currently in the northwesternmost part of the continent of Trokhia, within the borders of the Erythron Kingdom. Tall mountain ranges shielded the northern and eastern sides of the Erythron Kingdom from

outsiders. Sea dragons inhabited the ocean that bordered its western side, making travel by ship difficult. That meant it was only connected to other countries by its southern swamplands. Such geography made the land challenging to invade and easy to defend.

“As my plan advances, some will wish to destroy me. When that time comes, I will not stand for attacks from any direction,” he said.

Fighting a war on all sides was the height of foolishness. Terios knew, deep in his bones, that limiting battle to a single front and aiming for a swift resolution were the most important things in a war.

“While the Erythron Kingdom is naturally protected on all sides, this also makes expanding its territory troublesome. Nevertheless, I think its advantages outweigh its disadvantages.”

With that in mind, he used an illusion spell to visit the kingdom in the guise of a human. While gathering information inside the country, he heard about Krio Village being threatened by the disease, which is how he ended up here.

“I’ve experienced enough plans going awry in life to suspect foul play in any situation where coincidences come together so conveniently.” After pausing for a moment, he added, “I’m just putting it out there, but it wasn’t me.”

“I believe you.”

While talking with the black cat, Terios gathered the dead bodies from the village into the cemetery.

“There are forty-two in total. About thirty of them appear usable,” he mused.

“If that’s not enough, why don’t you go pick up the bodies of the people slain by soldiers and monsters?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary. There are nine children. Three per child is almost too— Hmm?”

Sensing something behind him, Terios whipped around. He saw the children, who had been sleeping in the village chief’s house, now plugging their noses from the intense smell as they approached.

“Um, what are you doing?” asked Mira, acting as a representative for them

all. Terios answered directly.

“I’m burning the bodies. If I don’t, the disease may spread.”

The green rot wasn’t transmitted through plants or animals, but its ability to spread from corpses was concerning.

“The dragon-marrow potion I had you all drink increased your vitality, and it heals most diseases, but its effects will wear off in a few days. I believe you should have resistance to the disease now that you’ve been treated for it, but there is a chance you could catch it again if the bodies are left as they are.”

“—Ah?!”

The children trembled in terror at being told they could suffer the same misery again.

“That is why I planned to burn them,” stated Terios. “That isn’t a problem in your faith, is it?”

“Our faith?” asked Mira, confused.

“It would appear not,” said Terios, relieved. He then explained, “Followers of the God of Earth, Ceres, believe that by returning to their mother, the earth, after death, they can be reborn as humans in the afterlife. For that reason, they are opposed to burning their dead.”

“Really?”

“Yes. That’s why, when a follower of Ceres commits a serious crime, they are burned alive. Their leftover bones aren’t even buried. They just get thrown away in a field,” continued Terios.

“Burned alive...?”

Merely imagining it made all the children, not just Mira, pale.

Seeing that, the black cat smiled maliciously and interjected, “It’s such a good thing you don’t follow Ceres. If you objected to us burning the bodies, we would’ve had to burn you right alongside them, right, Terios?”

“Wha—?!”

The children’s shocked, terrified eyes leaped over to Terios, and he quickly

assuaged.

“Please don’t worry. I would never do that.”

“Are you suuure?” said the black cat with a grin.

Terios glared at her like he had a foul taste in his mouth, then turned back to the gathered corpses and cast a spell.

“Soil Wall.”

The surface of the ground erupted to form a wall that encircled the bodies on all sides. Now that he had an environment that made it difficult for the flames to escape, he cast another spell.

“Cremation.”

A raging fire erupted behind the dirt wall, burning away the mountain of green-spotted bodies in the blink of an eye. The burning pillar’s intense blaze stretched toward the sky. In response, the children rubbed their cheeks as the gust of hot air threatened to burn them.

“Aaagh...”

“Wow...”

“I may have overdone it,” said Terios.

Seeing how the children both admired and shrank from such awesome power, Terios scratched his chin as if embarrassed, then suddenly met Mira’s eyes as she looked his way.

“You’re an amazing magic user, aren’t you, mister?” she asked.

“It’s all thanks to my dedication to training,” Terios said with a smile, flexing his bones in lieu of a bicep.

Mira’s eyes sparkled in response, and then she suddenly looked down weakly.

“I wish I could be like that...”

“What was that?” he asked.

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

Something clearly bothered her, but Terios didn’t inquire further. He turned

his eyes back to the column of fire that was burning the green rot away, waiting for the flames to die down before destroying the dirt wall. Countless white human bones scattered across the blackened ground, and the children's expressions twisted in grief.

"Mommy, Daddy..."

"And Carpo just got married this spring..."

Since their little village had numbered only about eighty people, everyone had known one another. They had worked and lived together like a family. Yet, all those people had been rendered indistinguishable, transformed first into horrifying green corpses and now into ivory bones.

Terios gently addressed the weeping children.

"I know you are all worried about what will happen to you now that you've lost your parents and grandparents, but please worry not."

After that first remark, he faced the mountain of bones and began reciting an incantation.

"Empty bones devoid of life, take this makeshift soul and move your arms and legs in service of the living—"

He took more time than when he made the dirt wall or the pillar of fire, drawing mana into his fingertips.

Mira stared at them, fascinated by something.

Oh? Could this be...? thought Terios, at risk of becoming distracted by the discovery of a surprising prize, but he finished reciting the last of the incantation and completed the spell.

"Create Bone Golem."

The massive amount of mana gathered in his fingertips morphed into a blue light and cascaded over the burned bones. Like they were being drawn by invisible strings, the bones that had been scattered across the ground clustered together and connected, forming skeletons that stood as if they still drew breath.

Twenty-nine in total. Well, that should be plenty.

Terios counted the skeletons that came together, which excluded the babies, who were too small, and the elderly, whose bones broke during cremation.

Nodding in satisfaction, he turned back to the children and said cheerfully, “Everyone, these will take the place of— Huh?”

“Aah! Eeeeeeeek!”

In complete contrast to Terios, who was about to gleefully launch into an explanation, the children were more disturbed than when they had first laid eyes on him. One of them even fell and lost control of their bowels out of sheer terror.

Even the friendliest of them, Mira, was frozen in fear, her face white as a sheet.

“What?” asked Terios.

“Oh, don’t look so confused, you moron,” rebuked the black cat, disparaging Terios as he fretted over the children’s reactions. “Has being dead for two hundred years left you that out of touch with the living? Just try to imagine how you’d feel if the bones of your friends and family suddenly started moving about.”

“Uhhh, I suppose I’d first find a blunt object to use as a weapon.”

“You would, wouldn’t you?”

The cat smiled as if she enjoyed watching him but also sighed in exasperation to deftly cover it up.

While that might not have clued him in, Terios did realize his mistake.

“Normal people fear them, hmm? I suppose I was so fixated on my goal that I failed to take everyone’s feelings into account,” he said.

“That’s how you died, too. Guess you haven’t improved at all.”

“Argh...” The cat’s sneer bugged the hell out of him, but since she was correct, he couldn’t make a comeback.

Gritting his teeth, he decided to give up on an argument he had no chance of winning. Then he looked to the children and spoke as kindly as he could

manage.

“Everyone, please calm down and listen to me. These bone golems won’t hurt you. Actually, I’ve designed them to protect you from fighting and hunger.”

“.....”

Doubt showed on their silent faces. He may have saved their lives, but the sight of the villagers’ bones walking about was too much for them to trust him readily.

Given the state they’re in, will they even listen to me if I explain...?

Mira, perhaps having sensed that Terios was at a loss, hesitantly asked, “You made them for us?”

“Yes, I did.”

At least she would listen to him. He felt relief well up inside him, then started to go into a detailed explanation.

“As you may have already noticed, you all are the only people I was able to save from the green rot.”

“.....”

“Now that this village has lost its adults, the workers, it will end up utterly destroyed. Even if we asked people from other places to come and help, no one would want to come to a village that was ravaged by the disease.”

“Oh no...”

The children were already grieving the loss of their friends and family, and now Terios was twisting the knife with the cruel truth.

After that, he quietly asked, “Everyone, do you want this village to be destroyed?”

“No,” replied Mira without a moment’s delay. “Krio Village is where we all lived together. I don’t want it to go away.”

Beyond being sad at the loss of her hometown, she probably also feared the very real possibility of losing her life’s foundation.

“Momma’s gone, and if I lose the village, too, I won’t...”

Lacking relatives to depend on, she had nowhere else to go. Dying on the wayside was her only alternative.

At the sight of Mira hanging her head, the other children started whispering to one another.

“My uncle lives in the next village, but he’s not nice. He’ll probably be mean to me.”

“Besides, are there any villages who would want to take in kids like us, who were sick?”

“No one will even believe us if we tell them we were cured...”

No matter how much they talked, they couldn’t imagine a bright future for themselves. The real problem was that no one would want to help a bunch of children who were nearly killed by the green rot but saved by a strange monster that gave them a potion. It was all way too creepy.

“Which means you’ve got no choice but to stay here in this village on the brink of collapse,” said the cat, her whiskers twitching in a smile, almost like she was giving condolences.

“That is why we need these bone golems!” said Terios. He held up his hand, and the twenty-nine golems snapped to attention all at once. “As you can see, they act in accordance with my commands. They can’t do complicated tasks, but they can harvest the crops or protect the fields from animals in place of the people who have died.”

“And then...?” asked Mira.

“Krio Village will survive thanks to their labor, of course,” shouted Terios with a thump to his chest, while Mira’s eyes shone at the glimpse of hope. “And unlike humans, bone golems have no need for food or sleep. They can work twenty-four hours a day without rest. That will liberate you from farmwork, giving you an even richer life than before.”

Still, the children would be responsible for a number of tasks, like cooking, because the bone golems had limited intelligence and, like Terios, no sense of taste. Even so, the labor of the bone golems would more than make up for the absence of the adults.

“How is that? Isn’t it wonderful?”

“.....”

Even as Terios addressed them proudly, the children remained silent, mixed emotions plastered over their faces.

On a logical level, they understood that they would need the bone golems to continue living in the village without adults. However, they probably couldn’t overcome their instinctive disgust at creations that used the bones of their friends and family.

Hmm, what a pickle, thought Terios, a finger on his chin.

Using the labor of bone golems wasn’t just to keep this village afloat; it was the first stepping-stone toward his ultimate goal of creating a peaceful world.

After all, most conflicts started over hunger. Someone close to dying of hunger might steal bread, even if it meant killing. Others may revolt in the face of being starved to death by high taxes. A country could also raid another country’s villages just to feed its own military. When extreme circumstances push people to the brink of starvation, they will abandon their morals and open themselves to murder.

Conversely, that meant most conflicts wouldn’t occur if people had access to enough food that they weren’t concerned about dying.

As the old saying goes, “Well fed, well bred.” People can’t be expected to be their best in an environment that warps them into starving beasts.

Therefore, stable food production was a prerequisite for peace, and that production required labor.

In the past, countries placed that burden on those deemed less than human—slaves. They claimed that with all the labor forced onto the slaves, their citizens would be freed from the stress of work and the worries of finding food and shelter. They could peacefully while away the hours, playing and enjoying the arts. But that all came to an end when the majority, the slaves, grew more and more enraged until they exploded at the minority, the citizens, and revolted.

Which leads me to believe labor peace needs a nonhuman source of labor.

History had shown Terios that enslaving people and treating them as property was a mistake. This was why he prepared labor in the form of bone golems. As simple tools, they lacked a will of their own that would lead to revolt.

And I thought it was such a wonderful idea, too. I'm surprised it's not going over well...

"That's because you evaluate everything from your perspective." The black cat had read Terios's thoughts and butted in with the Telepathy spell. *"Most humans operate on short-lived, frequently absurd emotions instead of well-ordered reason. You died and still can't get that through your thick skull?"*

"No, I understand that perfectly well. But I had anticipated they'd accept the golems, considering their lives are on the line," explained Terios, scratching his chin.

The cat let out a heavy sigh. *"Then you're a dumbass. Children are the most emotional creatures of all. They're not going to play along just because you say it's for their well-being. Don't you get that they'll rebel once they get drunk off power that isn't their own?"*

"Aren't you being too harsh?"

While Terios and the black cat glared at each other, sending telepathic messages back and forth, he felt an unexpected tug on his robe. He looked down in surprise to see a concerned Mira.

"Um, we understand that we need everyone's skeletons to work so we can live, but..."

"But?"

"Are they...suffering?"

Terios couldn't help but clap his hands together upon hearing her ask so hesitantly. "Aah! No, I've failed to explain properly. I'm terribly sorry."

As the black cat had pointed out, he was thinking only from his own perspective, from his own knowledge. He had failed to consider those like the village children, who lacked any understanding of magic.

Terios bowed his head low and apologized, then tackled the source of the

misunderstanding.

“It seems you have mistaken these for the monsters known as skeletons, but rest assured that they’re different. As I recited in the incantation earlier, these are bone golems,” he explained.

“How are they different?” asked Torio. He probably felt bad about making Mira do all the talking.

Terios searched for words that the children would understand so he could explain.

“Yes, they are the same in the sense that they’re both moving bones. However, while skeletons use the spirits of those who have died in order to move, bone golems use my power.”

“Huh?”

“In other words, they’re not haunted by the spirits of all the people who died,” said Terios, clearly laying out the logic to the confused children.

Skeletons used as undead servants were crafted through a blasphemous necromancy technique, whereby the soul of a deceased person was attached to it as a power source.

In contrast, the bone golems were made with augmancy, a magic used to augment. That spell did nothing more than create a mock soul from the caster’s magic power and fix it to the skeletons so they could move.

On the surface, the two skills seemed the same, as they both produced moving bones that acted in accordance with the caster’s commands. In reality, creating skeletons was a relatively easy skill that abused the spirit of the departed, while creating bone golems was more difficult but used only the bones of the deceased. Their theory and operation could not be further apart.

“So that means they’re not suffering?” asked Mira.

“Yes, that’s exactly what it means,” replied Terios with a strong nod. “All the spirits who passed have traveled to the afterlife. These bone golems are just me moving their empty skeletons with magic. No one is suffering.”

“I see... Thank goodness,” said Mira.

“...Is that really true?” asked Torio. While Mira was happily relieved, he regarded Terios with suspicion.

As a non-magic user, he had no way of actually telling a skeleton apart from a bone golem beyond accepting the verbal explanation Terios gave them.

“Well then, what about this?” offered Terios, sending a command to the bone golems so he could explain something related to souls. As he did, the twenty-nine bone golems immediately started doing a complicated ballroom dance he pictured in his mind. “How’s that? Do any of your friends know how to dance like this?”

Of course, you could do the exact same thing with a skeleton, but the sight of the scary bone golems pulling off elegant twirls was probably going to get the point across.

The children couldn’t help being drawn in by the show, and Mira was the first to burst out in laughter.

“Hee-hee, there’s no way grumpy old Boll could dance like that.”

“Ah...”

Seeing her laugh in amusement, the other children finally grasped that the bone golems weren’t the people they knew. They at least understood in their hearts, if not their heads.

“She’s right. My mom’s so stubborn. She’d never follow orders that nicely.”

“It’s not Daddy and the others...”

Their instinctual fear of the moving skeletons hadn’t gone away, and they were still hesitant about the use of their loved ones’ remains. On the other hand, they had accepted that the spirits of their friends and family were no longer in this world.

They looked sad, but they nodded to one another in acknowledgment.

It wasn’t just Terios who felt relief when he saw that, but Mira, too.

“Good.”

“Heh-heh-heh, this girl’s better at persuasion than some brainless moron I

know,” said the cat.

“Sorry for not having anything in my skull, I guess,” grumbled Terios as she sneered.

He then looked at Mira’s profile, her white hair fluttering.

This one might be a real find.

She had calmly accepted the fact that the children wouldn’t be able to continue living without the help of Terios and the bone golems, and she did an excellent job of persuading the other children. She was both smarter and braver than he would have expected of a village girl barely in adolescence. Not to mention her reaction when he cast Create Bone Golem—

“Even if I am cursed by Lady Luck, I should be grateful I came across such a diamond in the rough,” he said.

“Mister?” asked Mira.

“Pay me no mind. I have a bad habit of talking to myself,” replied Terios, nodding many times in satisfaction. Mira looked up at him in confusion, and the black cat followed her gaze and hurled an insult at him.

In the end, with some fear and uncertainty, the Undead King and the bone golems were accepted as members of Krio Village.



The bone golems used shovels that Terios pulled out of thin air to dig holes in the ground, which Mira and the children used to bury the remaining bones that hadn’t become golems.

“Vulcanus, God of Fire, light the dark path and guide their souls to the other side,” said Mira.

The other children put their hands together and prayed as she spoke.

Mira’s mother wasn’t an official priestess or anything like that, but she had been in charge of leading the prayers at funerals, weddings, and festivals. Mira had been with her, listening, and managed to memorize parts of the prayers without being taught them.

Terios waited for the abbreviated funeral services to draw to a close before

speaking again.

“Now, everyone, I’m going to do a little shopping. I’ve ordered the bone golems to protect the village, and you should be safe as long as nothing too extreme happens. If something does, however, tear this to call for me.”

He pulled slips of paper out of thin air and handed one to each of the children.

Confused, Mira stared at the complex pattern drawn on the paper.

“Mister, if you can pull anything out of thin air, why do you have to go shopping?” she asked.

“Actually, I’m just pulling out things I need from my own storage. I’m not creating them from nothing.”

“Oh, okay,” said Mira, looking slightly disappointed as Terios explained with a weak smile. From the perspective of someone as weak and uneducated as her, it must have seemed as if magic was almost omnipotent, but it turned out he couldn’t do everything.

So he definitely can’t bring back people who’ve died...

There was probably some way to call them back as a monster, like a skeleton, a zombie, or even a ghost, but there was certainly no way to restore a human life as if nothing had ever happened.

Momma did tell me that troubadour’s story about a person who tried to bring their lover back from the afterlife and failed.

As she swallowed back her tears from the pain of suddenly remembering, Terios waved and said he’d be back later. Then he recited some incantation and disappeared like smoke in the wind.

“Now what?” asked Torio, looking at the bone golems, which had spread out to surround the village.

Mira thought for a moment, then asked, “Well, how about we clean our houses?”

The effects of the potion were huge, even when you considered that the children had had as much porridge as they could want and had slept again after

eating. They were so full of energy that you wouldn't think they were recovering from a serious illness and so probably wouldn't be able to sleep. Besides, grief was going to hit them whether they were moving or not.

"Good idea. They're pretty dirty," agreed Torio, and the other children nodded as well. All nine of them went to their own homes.

"I'm back," declared Mira as she entered the empty home, and another wave of sadness washed over her.

First, she gathered the dishes scattered beside the bed.

"The honey's all gone."

A sweet smell still lingered in the small unglazed ceramic bottle that used to hold her favorite food, but there was otherwise none left. She'd eaten the rest without really tasting it while delirious from the green rot. It was a waste, thinking about it now.

Nonetheless, the honey might have given her enough strength to endure until Terios arrived. That honey, and her mother, who had left it by the bedside, had saved Mira's life.

"Thank you."

She rinsed the bottle and placed it on a shelf, then turned to the bed itself.

"I'll have to change the straw inside."

After her mother had disappeared, there had been no one to help care for her. Mira had been unable to get out of bed or clean up after herself.

Cheeks tinged pink with shame, she looked at the smelly bed, then noticed something strange.

"Come to think of it, how'd me and my clothes get clean?"

At some point, the strange smell coming from sweat and urine had disappeared. Most likely, Terios had used some spell to clean her while carrying her from this house to the village chief's.

"Magic really is amazing."

Though it certainly had limits, it could instantly create a dirt wall that would

take an adult dozens of hours to build, or produce a massive column of fire without firewood or kindling, or even summon moving skeletons, which normal human technology could never accomplish.

Mira feared how easily Terios's power could kill her, just like it could the other children, yet at the same time, she felt another emotion welling up in her heart.

"It's cool."

You couldn't resurrect the dead, even with magic. But you could cure the green rot if you did it before the person died. If she were as powerful as Terios, she could have saved the entire village. Her mother would still be smiling by her side.

The ridiculous fantasy filled her with regret and started to get her down, but she shook her head vigorously and chased away the feeling.

"Let's get cleaning."

Since her bed was simply a large sack filled with straw, it wasn't that hard to empty out and wash. The chore, which she took over years ago when she wet her bed, brought on feelings of nostalgia, but she occupied herself with cleaning. The sun reached its peak. Shortly afterward, Mira hung the newly cleaned sack of a bed on a rope to dry. She started cleaning the inside of the house and caught the scent of baked wheat wafting in from outside.

"Is that bread?"

Curious if someone was using the bread oven, she went outside and found Terios. He'd come back before they knew it, carrying a basket full of bread, fruit, and other food.

"I've returned," he said. "Shall we start with some food?"

"Yay!"

Drawn by the smell of food, the children poked out their heads and cheered as they gathered around Terios.

"Freshly baked white bread! Where'd you get so much of it?" one asked.

"I went to the capital to buy it," said Terios. "It's from a highly regarded bakery, so it'll be delicious."

“There’s figs and raisins... Oh, and even meat!” said another child.

“It’s ham. You’ve all gotten so thin because of the illness, so you should eat plenty of meat.”

Krio Village was so small and poor that it didn’t even have this kind of luxury on festival days. The children’s eyes shone as they drooled.

At some point, Torio came up to Mira. He looked at the other children and muttered in annoyance, “Those babies were all scared before, but all it takes is some food to win them over.”

“C’mon, there’s nothing you can do about it,” said Mira with a half-hearted smile, not wanting to scold the others.

Yes, Terios was probably enticing them with nice things in order to dispel their distrust from the bone golem incident. At any rate, without any adults around, they would have to rely on his power to survive. Weak, powerless children like them wouldn’t gain anything by being pointlessly stubborn.

“Come on—let’s go, too,” said Mira, grabbing Torio’s hand. Then she started walking over to where the other children were surrounding Terios. Torio blushed a little but obeyed.

“O-okay.”

“Ah, the joys of youth,” came a voice.

“Huh?” asked Mira. The voice had come out of nowhere from right next to her. She turned her head in its direction in surprise and found that the black cat had climbed onto her shoulder at some point. The feline was smiling unnervingly.

“It’s fine that you two get along, but you should wait at least three years before trying to repopulate the village, all right?” said the cat.

“Wha...? Oh.”

“Wh-what are you saying, you dumb animal?!”

Mira needed a moment to realize what the cat was implying but then quickly blushed. Bright-red, Torio shouted at her, “I wouldn’t do that to Mira!”

“Of course not. There’s no way Torio would have any weird feelings for a white-haired girl like me,” acknowledged Mira with a pained smile. Her pale locks were different from Torio’s brown hair, her mother’s red hair, and everyone else’s that she knew.

Since everyone in the village had been so kind, no one had made fun of her strange hair color. But on her way to the capital for a festival one time, she had noticed other travelers staring at her curiously and mocking her for looking like an old granny. It left scars that still hadn’t healed.

Mira sharply denied the accusation that had stirred painful memories, but Torio hung his head glumly for some reason.

“O-of course they’re not weird feelings...”

“Poor thing. You’re starting from zero, but keep at it.”

“Shut up!” shouted Torio angrily as he tried to grab the cat, who was only making things worse.

Smiling at the sight of them, Mira followed Terios into the chief’s house.

“I’ll help,” she said.

“Ah, thank you,” said Terios. He gave the children the basket of bread and fruit, and they ran off into the living room. Then he and Mira went into the kitchen.

“Could you please cut this ham for me?” he asked.

“Okay.”

Mira used a knife to cut the large chunk of meat Terios handed her, dividing it into portions on small plates so the others wouldn’t squabble over getting their share. Suddenly, she smelled a familiar sweet scent.

“Is that—?!”

She looked up in surprise to find an open ceramic jar in front of a pot Terios was using to boil water.

“Mister, is that...?”

“I was thinking about making some hot water with honey, since I heard it’s

good for the body,” he said, revealing the contents of the jar to Mira, who walked over unsteadily. “But I don’t know how much is appropriate. Would you mind...? What’s wrong?”

“...Huh?” Mira finally realized she was crying when she heard his concerned question.

“Do you feel sick if you eat honey, by any chance?” asked Terios.

“No, that’s not it. I’m fine,” said Mira, quickly wiping away her tears and smiling up at Terios. “I love honey.”

She loved that golden honey and the memories its flavor brought back. When Mira had found that empty jar in the house, the girl thought she’d never be able to taste it again. Perhaps she only craved it as nothing more than a sad compensation in place of her mother. Even so, she shed tears of joy at Terios giving her something she thought she’d lost.

“Could I have a taste?” Mira asked.

“Sure, go ahead,” Terios replied, and handed her a wooden spoon.

She scooped out a spoonful of honey and placed it in her mouth. A tingly sweetness spread across her tongue, but its flavor and texture were just slightly different from what she remembered.

“Not all honey is the same, is it?” she asked.

“No. It’s made from flower nectar that bees collect. The flavor and scent can change depending on what flower fields the bees live in.”

Mira squinted her eyes tightly to try to keep the tears from flowing as Terios told her about something he heard from a beekeeper a long time ago. She smiled gently.

“It’s a little different, but I like this honey, too. It tastes nice,” she said.

“I’m happy you find it to your liking,” he said with a clack of his teeth and a smile.

Mira took the jar and dropped some honey into the hot water, taking care not to make it too sweet.

They brought the finished food and drink to the living room, where the hungry children waited.



After a bountiful dinner, they all slept in the chief's house like before because one of the little boys was afraid to go home to an empty house.

The next day, Terios gently posed a question to the children as they ate a breakfast of leftovers.

"Everyone, do you have anything to do today?"

"Uh..." The children looked at one another in thought, but nothing came to mind.

The fields had been sown a long time ago, and the harvest was still a ways away, so they didn't have anything urgent on their plates. If pressed, they might say they should pull weeds, but the bone golems Terios had made were taking care of that and didn't need their help.

Although at some point they would have to sort through the belongings of their families and neighbors who died of the green rot, the wounds on their hearts were still too fresh to do that now.

"There's not really anything once I finish washing the dishes," said Mira.

"I don't have any plans..., " said Torio.

"Me neither."

"Me neither."

Following Mira and Torio, the rest of the children confirmed they had no chores to do.

Expecting that response, Terios happily offered a suggestion.

"Well then, everyone, shall we study?"

"Study?" The children's eyes widened at the unfamiliar word.

"Yes. First, we'll learn how to read and write, then we'll practice arithmetic, like adding and subtracting."

"Huh?"

Terios ignored the confusion and made another inquiry. “Is there anyone here who can read or write? Or do addition and subtraction?”

“Momma taught me the numbers up to a hundred. But reading...,” said Mira.

“Reading and writing’s the village chief’s job!” shouted Torio, as if protecting her from embarrassment.

“That’s right. Normally only the village chief and their family can read and write,” said Terios with a smile and a nod, not blaming the children for their lack of education. “However, it appears that your chief and their family are no longer here. There’s no one in this village anymore who can read, write, or do arithmetic.”

“.....”

Their silence acted as confirmation. Though they didn’t know what the village chief used reading, writing, and arithmetic for, they could sense they’d lost something important.

“That is why all of you should study and learn how,” said Terios.

“Ummm...”

Despite Terios’s cheerful tone, the children just stared at one another in confusion.

Hmm, it seems they don’t understand the value of literacy and mathematics.

The learned would understand how valuable those skills were for daily life and would be grateful that Terios offered to teach them for free. But these village children had spent their entire lives in ignorance. They couldn’t possibly understand the value of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

So Terios kindly and thoroughly explained.

“If you don’t know how to do arithmetic, people might lie to you about the amount of change you get when you’re shopping, or a lord might charge you too much tax, but you’d never know.”

“That happens?!” cried Mira in shock. Apparently, she’d never faced that hardship before.

It looks like the adults of the village took good care of their children.

Regretting the loss of such kind and capable people yet again, he continued the conversation.

“Unfortunately, this world isn’t peaceful yet. In fact, it’s brimming with people so obsessed with money that they’ll even frame those they deceive.”

“Really...?”

“That’s why you all need to learn arithmetic, to become the kind of people who can’t be deceived.”

“I guess.”

The children nodded, their mixed emotions evidence that they hadn’t understood how the village chief had protected them until it was too late.

“Next is reading and writing. If you can do that, you can enjoy reading books,” he informed them, casting the Apport spell to pull a picture book out of thin air to show the children. “For example, this book tells a story of a hero who defeats a hydra.”

“Ah, that’s Arkhaia, the demigod!” said Torio, his eyes sparkling with excitement alongside the other boys’.

The hero Arkhaia was the son of Jupiter, God of the Sky, and a human queen. His incredibly popular legends spread across the continent through troubadour songs and books.

“You know this story already? Well, I have plenty of others: stories about a hero who rides a Pegasus, or a princess held captive in a castle of thorns,” said Terios, pulling out a number of books he had bought yesterday and laying them out on the table.

“There’s so many...”

Books were so valuable that there was only one in the entire village; it belonged to the chief. The children were never allowed to touch it. On top of that, these books contained not only words but pictures as well. A single volume cost as much as building a house.

While the children didn’t have a firm grasp of their exact value, they’d been

told how amazing books were. Seeing a mountain of them left them at a loss for words.

“When it’s raining or snowing and you can’t play outside, you can stay in and pass the time by reading all kinds of stories,” said Terios.

More importantly, being able to read and write would help them make massive strides in the study of commerce, military affairs, and a number of other fields. But telling children who only wanted to play that they needed to study in order to study even more wasn’t likely to please them, so he kept that part to himself.

“What do you think? Would you like to learn to read, write, and do arithmetic?” he asked.

“I’ll do it. Please teach us.”

“Fine, I’ll learn, too.”

“Me too.”

“Me too.”

Mira was the first to volunteer, and the other children followed.

Terios smiled joyfully and said, “All right, let’s start with how to read your letters.”

Taking out a picture book meant to teach noble children to read through familiar examples like *bread* and *dog*, he taught them how to read letters.



Mira was learning to read, something that only important people like the village chief or government officials knew how to do. On top of being fun, it made her feel like she was becoming an adult faster. However, it was mentally taxing, especially since she didn’t normally use her brain like this.

After a short while, the younger children started to complain.

“Hey, how long are we gonna do this?”

“I wanna play outside.”

The moment Terios heard them, he quickly closed the book he was reading

and summoned a leather ball from out of nowhere.

“Let’s finish there and have some fun,” he said.

“Yay! Kickball!”

“After that, let’s play tag!”

The children took the ball from his hands and rushed energetically out of the village chief’s house.

“Geez, that lot,” muttered Torio with a tired smile before following after to keep an eye on them.

With everyone else gone from the room, Mira bowed her head to Terios. “I’m sorry they just ran off like that...”

“We’re not in any rush. Don’t worry about it,” reassured Terios. She bowed again, then asked about something she’d been wondering.

“Um, why are you teaching us?”

Ignorant about the world as she was, even Mira could guess that the book he used for the class was incredibly expensive. What could he possibly stand to gain by spending all that money and teaching them to read, write, and do arithmetic?

Why did he even save us in the first place?

Thinking about it now, she realized that the potion he used to cure their green rot was also probably costly. She didn’t understand why he would go so far out of his way to save mere villagers like them. Though Terios had been kind to her, a corner of her heart filled with doubt toward him.

That’s it. Not knowing in itself is scary.

Suddenly, as if the scales had fallen from her eyes, she realized it. Things she couldn’t understand were scary because she couldn’t tell whether they posed a threat.

That’s why I wanna understand.

She wanted to know more about Terios so she could cast off fear and simply be grateful.

Perhaps he picked up on her decision, because his eyes narrowed in a smile, and he gently patted her head. “You want to find out because you don’t understand. That feeling is the very essence of learning. As long as you don’t forget that passion, you’ll blossom into a brilliant person.”

“Okay.”

She nodded deeply, and he withdrew his hand, then answered her original question.

“Now, about why I’m teaching you. In truth, it’s required for fulfilling my objective: the creation of a peaceful world.”

“Huh?”

The unexpected response took Mira off guard. The black cat, previously unseen, suddenly materialized and sneered with exceptional cruelty.

“Hee-hee, despite the fact that if you give the moronic masses knowledge, they’ll revolt against the ruling class and plunge the continent into the fires of war.”

“Stop talking like your pessimistic imaginings are a legitimate conclusion,” rebuked Terios in annoyance, even though the cat spoke like she’d seen it happen.

Seeing them like that only gave Mira another question.

Just what kind of relationship do these two have?

At first glance, you might think pet and owner, but there wasn’t much affection between them, nor was there mutual respect. If she had to guess, Mira might say they were like friends who constantly bickered, but what history could a pile of moving bones and a talking cat possibly have to end up like this? The mysteries just kept coming.

But before Mira could ask about their relationship, Terios turned the conversation back to its original topic.

“To build a peaceful world, I’ve spent a long time defeating countless monsters, refining my magic skills, and exploring ancient dungeons to gather treasures. However, no matter how much power they gather, no one person

can eliminate fighting by themselves.”

“If you could manage that, you’d be greater than even the gods,” said the cat, beaming, which cast Mira deeper into doubt.

Not even the gods can make a peaceful world?

Her mother had told her that a number of gods had created this world, but it was strange that its creators couldn’t even free it from conflict.

Perhaps anticipating what Mira was thinking, the black cat grinned, but she instead continued the conversation without answering this new question.

“You can’t do it alone. So this numbskull’s raising collaborators.”

“That is correct. I have designs on you as assistants—after you’ve all grown wonderfully, of course. That is why I’m teaching you,” said Terios with a light clack of his teeth, smiling, the implication being that Mira didn’t need to thank him. “Rest assured that I have no intention of forcing you to help me. Even just raising you to be intelligent people and improving your daily life to a level of abundance will help work toward peace.”

“I see.” Mira nodded, accepting the explanation, but Terios suddenly changed topics.

“By the way, Mira, I have a request I’d like to make of you.”

“What is it?”

“Would you try learning magic?”

“...What?”

For a moment, she was dumbstruck, unable to process his words.

After slowly working through their meaning, she finally shrieked out of sheer shock.

“Whaaaaaattt?!”

“Hey, what’s going on?!” shouted Torio as he rushed back into the chief’s house from where he’d been playing outside. The loud cry had likely surprised him. “Are you okay? Did that bony old coot do something weird to you?!”

“Ha, bony old coot. Pfft.”

“Well, I wasn’t planning on acting young at this point anyway...,” muttered Terios somewhat woundedly, while the black cat burst out laughing like a child holding nothing back.

Mira smiled in amusement but quickly cleared up the misunderstanding.

“It’s nothing—I was just surprised,” she said.

“You sure it wasn’t anything?” asked Torio.

“Yep, it’s fine. He’s nice anyway. He wouldn’t do anything weird to me.”

Even if his kindness was born from selfishly hoping the children would assist him in the future— No, it was precisely because she understood it was in his self-interest that she could fully trust him.

To show Torio that they were getting along, she took Terios’s white hand. However, for some reason, this upset him even more.

“You perverted, bony old coot!”

“What was that?” asked Mira.

“You’re quite the temptress if you’re doing this on purpose,” said the black cat to a confused Mira, before sighing. Torio glared even more angrily at Terios.

The cat leaped onto Torio’s head and tapped him on the cheek with her tail.

“Don’t worry about it, cherry boy.”

“D-don’t call me a cherry boy!”

“This bony old coot doesn’t even have anything to do the nasty with. Want to take a peek?” said the cat. Ignoring Torio’s yelling, she leaped over to Terios and flipped open the front of his robe.

Torio nodded firmly at the sight of Terios’s bare pelvis.

“...Guess you’re right,” he said.

“Please don’t use such a crude method to convince him,” said Terios. Surely a man would feel sensitive about losing that part of himself after becoming undead.

He fixed the front of his robe, feeling slightly dispirited. Torio stared at him for

a moment, seeming to have finally accepted the situation, then went back to watching over the other children.

“Ha, he’s so naive. You can still get up to all sorts of perverted stuff after losing a thing or two,” said the cat.

“Please be quiet. This conversation is getting tiresome,” said Terios as he grabbed the sneering cat by the scruff of her neck and tossed her out the window.

Mira watched, face bright red, secretly curious as to how someone could still do perverted things without *that*, but she instead put the conversation back on track.

“Um, what you were talking about before... Would even someone like me be able to use magic if I studied?” she asked.

“Yes, you have a talent for it,” he replied, nodding vigorously to a still uncertain Mira. He lit a blue light on the tip of his finger and asked, “Can you see that?”

“Yes, it’s a very pretty blue light.”

“This is mana, the source of magic. However, normal people can’t see it.”

“Wha—?!”

Terios gestured Mira over to look out the window, then waved his hand in the direction of the children playing ball a little ways off. When he did, the blue light fell from the sky like snow, all around the children.

“Ah!” Mira couldn’t help but gasp in admiration at the dreamily beautiful sight. But despite being surrounded by the light, the other children didn’t notice it at all as they played ball.

“As you can see, normal people can’t sense mana,” said Terios.

“Does that mean I’m not normal?” asked Mira, frowning sadly as she touched her white hair.

It was different from everyone else’s, even her mother’s, and if anyone told her she was special for it, she wouldn’t feel superior. Instead, she would feel alienated.

“I’m sorry, I know you were trying to compliment me...,” said Mira.

“No, I should be apologizing,” said Terios with a bowed head.

With a white bone finger, he touched her white hair.

“But you know, I quite like your hair, Mira. It reminds me of silver thread. It’s lovely,” he said.

“Silver thread...”

Mira had never even touched a silver coin, so she couldn’t imagine what shiny silver thread would look like. But it was the first time anyone had ever complimented her in that manner, and she couldn’t help but flush.



“And while it is a rare hair color, I have seen other people with it,” continued Terios.

“Ah, there are people with the same hair color as me?!”

“Yes, you do see them sometimes near the center of the continent,” said Terios like it was no big deal, despite Mira’s shock.

She had only ever known this tiny village, while he’d seen so much of the world. White hair wasn’t unusual to him.

“Oh, so there are other people with the same hair...,” said Mira with a tiny smile. While she was happy to learn there were others like her, she also felt embarrassed about being convinced she was the only different person.

Terios gently continued, “And I know that you don’t necessarily like it, but not being normal, being special, is a wonderful thing.”

“Is it?”

“Yes. In fact, I was able to save everyone from the green rot because I’m special.”

“Ah?!”

As Terios scratched his cheekbone bashfully at his own arrogance, Mira went rigid like she’d been struck by lightning.

That’s right. Normal isn’t good enough.

Even though they hadn’t done anything wrong, every last one of the thoroughly average villagers had caught the green rot and died. And as an ordinary child, Mira hadn’t been able to do anything to ease their suffering; she had only managed to lie in bed and wait for death. It had taken the extraordinary magic user Terios to be saved.

If I remain average, I’ll be powerless if the same thing happens again.

She had hated lying there, begging for a mother who never returned, waiting to die. And she couldn’t bear to risk losing Torio and the other children, who had managed to survive despite it all.

I hated this white hair for making me different. But what if it was actually the

source of my abnormal power—?

Of course, white hair was likely unrelated to magical talent. But to Mira, that white hair proved that she, too, could become exceptional and save people like Terios had.

“Mister, please teach me magic!”

“Gladly.”

Terios nodded, smiling because Mira had proposed it. He held up a single finger before continuing, “Well, then, now that I’ll be teaching you magic on top of reading, writing, and arithmetic, please refer to me as Teacher instead of mister.”

“Yes, Teacher!” replied Mira energetically. Suddenly, she had a thought.

Maybe he doesn’t like being called mister...

He seemed displeased when Torio had called him a bony old coot, so maybe he didn’t like being treated like he was old. Seeing such a humanlike facet of Terios made her break into a smile.



Terios walked to the outskirts of the village to teach Mira magic through practice. It appeared the settlement had been in the process of clearing the surrounding forests to increase available farmland. Arriving in a clearing where logs and stumps still remained, he cast a spell and pulled a thin stick out of the air.

“This magic wand will release a fireball if you apply mana to it and recite an incantation. Watch closely,” he said.

“Okay.”

Mira nodded energetically, and Terios raised the wand and chanted, “*Fireball.*”

At that, a sphere of fire about the size of a fist shot out from the tip of the wand and struck a stump a short ways off with a small explosion.

“Wow, magic really is amazing.”

“All right, now you try.”

He placed the wooden wand in her hand, and her eyes sparkled.

“Huh, you want me to? Can I really do that, too?”

“Yes, it’s a simple spell, so you should be able to do it as you are now.” Mira was perplexed, but Terios nodded emphatically. “It’s not difficult. Just form an image in your mind of a sphere of fire like the one I just shot, focus your concentration on the wand, and recite the incantation.”

“O-okay!” She nodded nervously, took several deep breaths, then raised the wand in both hands and shouted, “*Fireball!*”

A ball of fire that looked a lot like the one Terios had just made erupted from the tip of the wand and struck the stump with the same small explosion.

“...I—I did it!”

“Indeed, congratulations.”

She had been frozen in disbelief for a moment, but she then jumped in joy while he brought his hands together in a rattling round of applause.

“By the way, I must apologize for one thing,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“That wand is merely a stick. There’s no magic cast on it to make it capable of shooting a fireball.”

“What?”

It seemed she didn’t understand what he’d just said. She looked back and forth a number of times between the wand gripped in her hand and the burn mark left on the stump.

“But it made a ball of fire when I said the word...”

“That was all your own power, Mira. The wand had no effect on it.”

“Huh? But...”

“You must be wondering why, if magic is this easy to use, you haven’t been able to until now.”

“Y-yeah.” Mira bobbed her head again and again, surprised that he so accurately guessed what was on her mind.

Smiling at her cute mannerism, Terios explained, “You were able to cast the spell because you saw me do it first. You were *cognizant* that if you pointed the wand while saying the word, a ball of fire would come out.”

“I was cognizant?” Mira was still confused, but the part that Terios emphasized was, in fact, the essence of all magic use.

“There are two things you need to use magic. The first is the power that your soul produces: mana. Every human being has a soul, but only about one in two hundred have the ability to produce mana.”

“Two hundred?”

Mira couldn’t even wrap her mind around a number of that size. The village where she grew up had a population that didn’t even exceed one hundred.

Smiling at the now thoroughly confused girl, Terios continued, “The other thing you need is cognizance. I suppose you could call that ‘a strong belief.’”

“I can do magic if I believe?”

“Put simply, yes.”

To be more accurate, this world was actually the product of the cognitions of humans, monsters, and various other creatures, a vague— Well, that complicated explanation would only confuse Mira further, so Terios kept it to himself for now.

“You hadn’t seen magic before this, right?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’d heard people talk about it, though...”

“As I suspected. Magic users are scarce, so most people rarely see magic unless they’re royalty, nobility, or in the military.”

You might happen upon clergy using healing magic if you went to a church in a large city, but the average person would never have access to those services without a large sum of money. So Terios gently patted Mira’s head, ensuring she understood it wasn’t something to be embarrassed about.

“Since you had never seen magic before, you thought it belonged to a different world entirely. Convinced that you were incapable of using it, you subconsciously sealed your own magic.”

It wasn't an uncommon occurrence. Even people unaware of their high levels of mana could be influenced by the magically inept. By the time their mind and body would have grown enough to use that mana, they had already internalized that they couldn't.

Perhaps this phenomenon was the work of a subconscious preservation instinct. A part of them knew that if they used magic poorly, they could wind up severely persecuted or outright manipulated.

“But you've seen me use magic, and you know that it really does exist. On top of that, you realized your potential for it when you witnessed the light of mana. You believed that you, too, could use magic if you had the wand. And that conviction is what brought forth the fireball.”

Nevertheless, sometimes people who had only a small pool of mana or who were old and set in their ways would never be able to truly believe, no matter how much they practiced. Those people would never be able to cast spells. By contrast, Mira succeeded on her first attempt because she was young, innocent, and had a vast pool of mana.

“Mira, you harbor a special talent. Please hold tight to your belief in yourself.”

“...Okay.” Mira's cheeks turned pink bashfully as Terios complimented her again. As if returning the favor, she complimented him back. “Teacher, you truly are smart. It was easy to understand how to read letters, and you're really good at teaching magic, too.”

“Even though my head is empty.” Terios laughed, poking his light, empty cranium.

Out from his shadow crawled the black cat, a weary expression on her face.

“Whoa, what happened to you?” asked Terios.

“Those brats are annoying, so I decided to come see how things were going here,” she spat. Her fur was a mess, like the kids had been petting her every which way.

“Ha-ha-ha, even you’re no match for kids.”

“I’m just letting this slide one time ’cause they might prove interesting in the future,” she countered, utterly exasperated at Terios’s incessant chuckling.

A moment later, the cat returned to her typical ill-natured grin.

“By the way, did you know that little boy has noticed the girl is gone and is making a racket about a perverted skeleton doing something nasty to her?”

“He’s quite distrustful,” said Terios. Was he really that suspicious? He sighed and decided it was likely an overreaction from an adolescent boy in love.

He stretched out a hand to Mira, who was watching them with concern, and said, “I wanted to teach you a little more, but it’s almost noon. Shall we go back and have some lunch?”

“Okay!”

“Make me some meat. Best if it’s roast rabbit or squirrel,” said the cat.

Mira nodded energetically and took Terios’s bony hand, and the black cat leaped lightly onto her head.

As the three of them headed back to the village, Mira hesitantly asked, “Um, Teacher, is there a chance you’re...a pervert who likes kids?”

“Why are you asking that all of a sudden?!” cried Terios, his jawbone close to detaching from the shock, but Mira rushed to explain.

“You hold my hand like this, and you pat my head often, so I was wondering if you’re into kids.”

“You’ve misunderstood,” said Terios flatly with a serious expression. “I do like children, but absolutely not in a perverted way.”

To be perfectly honest, he had his motives. But it was only to console a brokenhearted little girl who’d lost her mother and build her trust in order to forge her into a promising, capable resource for the future.

“Besides, didn’t we established that I don’t have those kinds of emotions because I don’t have *that*?” Terios opened the front of his robe again to reveal his featureless pelvis.

For some reason, Mira blushed and looked away when he did. “Teacher, that’s shameless.”

“But why?!”

“Heh-heh-heh, this girl’s more talented than I thought,” the cat remarked with a laugh, wiggling her whiskers in a wry smile at Terios being wholly wrapped around Mira’s finger.

And that, despite the wild misunderstandings, was how he gained his first apprentice in magic.



CHAPTER 2 | The Disease in the Forest

Five days had passed since Terios had appeared in Krio Village. Perhaps because they had so little knowledge of the world, the children were already getting used to living with the undead.

“Teacher, here it comes!”

“Ah, nice one.”

Terios used his chest to stop the ball the young boy had kicked, then bounced it on his knees and feet a few times before passing it to the girl next to him.

“You’re amazing!”

“I used to do competitions where you had to keep kicking the ball without dropping it, actually. Whoever kicked the ball the most times was declared the winner,” said Terios. He had taught the children to deftly kick a ball using those experiences from long ago.

Mira looked on with a smile, then turned to the brick oven and cast a spell.

“Fire.”

An ember shot from her fingertip, and the firewood burst into crimson flames.

“Is that good?” asked Mira as she turned back to Torio, who’d been watching from behind.

“Yeah, thanks,” he said. “Sorry for asking you to light it all the time, though.”

“It’s fine—don’t worry about it.” She grinned while Torio scratched his head apologetically.

The villagers rarely asked someone to make a fire until they had turned fifteen and been accepted as an adult. This was because of a disaster that happened in another village decades ago. Some children played with a flame, accidentally spreading it until it obliterated the settlement’s wheat fields. Shortly after, the place fell to ruin.

As the village baker, Torio’s father was responsible for making all the bread

his neighbors would eat. Since Torio would someday take his place, his father had naturally taught him how to start a fire. Still, turning wood scraps into charcoal took work, so he'd asked Mira to help quickly light a fire with magic. Of course, Mira had no way of knowing that Torio's request was simply an excuse to hang out with the girl he liked, a common ploy of boys his age.

"I've seen it a lot now, but your magic's still awesome every time," he said.

"Hee-hee, thank you," said Mira, sheepishly giggling at the compliment.

He blushed at how cute she was, but then he started complaining. "But why are you the only one who can do magic? Wish I could do it, too..."

"S-sorry." She bowed her head, even though his tone suggested he blamed the general unfairness of the situation rather than her.

He lightly poked her head. "It's not your fault. It's just that the gods are unjust."

"...Yeah, I guess." Her expression darkened, recalling the faces of the people who had died, her mother and Torio's parents.

It wasn't just the adults and elderly, either; even a newborn had perished. Mira and Torio were only alive because they'd lucked into being saved by Terios.

Having been born into a small, destitute village, sometimes Mira suffered from hunger and cold, all while hearing about kings and nobles born into cities who feasted in warm mansions. Although believing those tales had prepared her for the unfairness of the world, she still resented this absurd fate.

Is that why Terios wants to build a peaceful world?

Perhaps he aspired to a world where people could live without fear of unjust death because he'd lost something precious to him. She wanted to ask but felt it would be rude.

As she thought of Terios, Torio grew annoyed and tapped on her shoulder.

"Don't trust that bony old coot too much."

"You still have doubts?" Mira smiled awkwardly at Torio's stubbornness.

While it was unsurprising that Torio wouldn't completely accept a terrifying bone monster, Terios *had* saved their lives and stayed with them for five days now. But still—

“We wouldn't be alive if he wasn't around. Questioning him will only wear you out,” said Mira.

“I get that, but...” He failed to find the words to counter Mira's logic.

He probably only rebelled out of discomfort with his own powerlessness, even though the reality was that they had no choice but to accept Terios.

Earlier, Torio had suggested that he take care of baking bread himself because it was a waste to leave the stored wheat to rot. That must have also been an attempt to stave off his feelings of powerlessness.

I guess I understand that feeling a little.

Although she wasn't dissatisfied with her current life, she felt bad relying completely on Terios. Even so, as a girl unskilled in studying and magic and not skilled in anything else, she dreamed of one day standing on her own. And within that dream, she dreamed of someday paying Terios back. Which is why she said—

“Let's work hard to study right now. We can think about the future when we're adults.”

“A-all right.” Torio nodded, blushing as Mira encouraged him.

The next moment, his expression turned earnest. He grabbed Mira's shoulders.

“Hey, Mira, when we're adults—”

“Your bread's burning.”

“Aah?!” Torio shrieked and leaped away from Mira at the unexpected sound of a woman's voice.

Just then, a soft mass of fur hopped on top of Mira's head. “Ms. Cat?”

“I do like the color black, but I detest when bread or meat gets burned,” she remarked, licking herself until Mira grabbed her and set her in front of them.

“Really? I like the burned bits of porridge when they get all crispy,” said Mira.

“Hmm, I suppose burnt wheat porridge or rice isn’t that bad.”

“Rice?”

“A grain farmed in the hot regions to the south. It’s plumper than wheat.”

“Oooh, I’d like to try it someday.”

“Hang on a minute!” shouted an incensed Torio, snatching the black cat from Mira’s hands despite how she was enjoying talking about food. “You butted in on purpose, didn’t you?”

“How upsetting. And after I’d gone out of my way to mercifully save a pitiful cherry boy from the trauma of crushing defeat, too.”

“Y-you don’t know I would’ve failed!”

“Your voice is shaking, cherry boy.” The black cat grinned cruelly in the face of Torio’s bravery.

Mira smiled as she watched. “You two get along well.”

“Don’t we?”

“We do not!” Torio violently flung the smug black cat, but she flew in a strange trajectory through the air, as if she were jumping off of nothing, then landed back on Mira’s head.

“By the way, isn’t it time for you to practice magic?” the feline inquired.

“Oh, you’re right. I look forward to your bread, Torio,” said Mira.

“Yeah, leave it to me. You’ll regret this, you goddamn cat!” Torio puffed his chest up with pride as Mira waved good-bye and left, then barked at the cat like a dog that’d lost a fight.

With his shouts behind them, the two rushed off to the space separated from the village.

“I’m sorry Torio’s got such a temper,” said Mira.

“Don’t worry. I enjoy teasing him because his reactions are straightforward, unlike a certain disillusioned skeleton I know.”

“Still, don’t you think it’s mean calling him ch-cherry boy?”

“My, so you do know what a virgin is. Where’d you learn something like that?”

“W-well, I heard my next-door neighbor, Sepia, making some strange sounds at night. I asked her if she was sick or something, and she told me a few things...”

They chatted lively about indecent things until they arrived at the same clearing they always used for magic practice.

But Mira halted in an instant because she felt like something was off. “Hmm? Something’s different from normal...”

The atmosphere was not the same as the previous day, as if something had changed, but she couldn’t quite place a finger on what it was.

While she stood there perplexed, the cat called out in amusement atop Mira’s head, “Heh-heh, well, what do we have here?”

“Do you know what’s different, Ms. Cat?”

“I do, but my lips are sealed.”

“Hmph.” Mira pouted while the cat smiled teasingly. She looked around again. “The stump we use as a target is there, and the other trees around... Oh?!”

Passing her eyes over the forest that surrounded the clearing, she finally realized what it was. The overgrown weeds were trampled down, as though something had passed through.

“Was there a wild boar?” Mira remained on the lookout for any signs of creatures in the vicinity as she squinted at the ground. Luckily, she managed to find a track, but it just left her confused again. “What is this?”

It wasn’t like a boar’s hoof at all. Instead, it was a five-toed footprint that looked quite a bit like a human’s. However, something seemed off about it, especially its oddly elongated toes.

“No way. Does that mean...?”

Though primates like monkeys and gorillas inhabited this continent, only one thing popped into people's minds when they first thought of something that resembled a human.

"...A monster?!"

"Correct." The black cat chuckled at Mira's shriek of fear.

"I—I have to tell Teacher!"

She didn't know what monster it was, but first, she needed to get help. She put the gloomy forest behind her and ran as fast as she could.



"It's a goblin."

After Mira had run up and informed him, gasping for breath, Terios had hurried to the clearing away from the village and examined the footprint. He discerned it immediately.

"I imagine you've heard of them, right, Mira? They're monsters with green skin that are about as tall as a child."

"Yes, they come up in stories a lot." She nodded at Terios's explanation. Along with dragons, they were some of the most infamous monsters, so notorious that even a village girl would have likely heard of them.

"But you didn't recognize the footprint. Does that mean there's never been a goblin in this village?" he asked.

"No, there hasn't. Or at least, this is the first I've seen."

"I see." Considering Mira's age, that meant this area had been free of them for about eight years.

But why goblins...? thought Terios, his hand on his chin.

Monsters were terrifying creatures that attacked humans. Like all humanoid monsters, however, they were also more intelligent than animals and so rarely assailed human settlements. Approximately two thousand years ago, humanity was weak, nothing more than food for monsters. But now that humans had established large countries, goblins understood that attacking a human settlement meant getting wiped out in a counterattack. That's why you rarely

encountered them unless you went deep into their territory, such as caves and forests.

It shouldn't be possible for them to suddenly show up like this.

The goblins wouldn't need to fear retaliation if they attacked Krio Village; the kingdom had abandoned it because it was sullied with the green rot. But the goblins also wouldn't grasp the complicated situation on the human side of affairs.

Based on the number of tracks, I would guess there's only one or two of them. How curious.

Goblins were weak. Even an untrained adult human could easily come out on top in a one-on-one brawl with a goblin. Well aware of this, the goblins stuck to working in groups. Their danger lay in the sheer numbers they used to overwhelm their opponent.

And yet, they're moving in such small numbers. It looks like they returned to where they came from after observing the village...

However, it wasn't unheard of for goblins to wisely scout ahead and observe their enemy to gauge their strength. Terios couldn't help but feel perplexed.

He fell into deep silence as he thought. Perhaps that was what made Mira tug on his robe uneasily.

"Teacher..."

"Ah, my apologies, I didn't mean to concern you. It's all right. I'll take care of this right away," he said, patting Mira's head to calm her. They returned to the village temporarily and gathered the children in the village chief's house to explain the situation.

"We've discovered some goblin tracks outside the village. I'm going into the forest to exterminate them. Please wait here inside the house until then."

"Huh?!"

"It's all right. Even if there are a hundred or a thousand goblins, I can clean them out in half a day."

"....."

While Terios proudly puffed up his chest, the children turned pale and fell silent. He wanted to believe they were afraid of the monsters.

“They are, of a monster known as the bony old coot,” came the cat’s voice.

“No, it’s the monstrous talking cat they’re afraid of,” Terios responded to the cat’s telepathic jab. Then he continued his explanation.

“I’m going to have the bone golems protect all of you, so you need not worry while I’m gone.” He pointed to the line of bone golems outside, armed with farming tools, and the children let out small sighs of relief despite their lingering fear.

“Mommy and Daddy are going to protect us...”

“You’re not gonna correct them and tell them those aren’t their parents?” asked the cat.

“I’m not that fussy.” Considering the children with tears in their eyes, he shot a glare at the feline, who kept sending him screwed-up messages.

As he did, Torio voiced a doubt. “Is it really all right? I don’t wanna bad-mouth the dead, but they don’t look too tough.”

“You’re right—they are not that strong,” Terios immediately agreed, having nothing to gain by glossing it over.

Unlike golems created from scratch using dirt or stone, bone golems’ abilities varied wildly with their skeletal hosts. That’s because the magic used the memories ingrained in the bones as a catalyst for movement. Though they lacked both soul and personality, the creatures retained the knowledge of many basic actions performed in life, such as “walk” or “raise hand.”

This made them convenient, because you could get humanlike motions from them without having to teach them from zero. But by the same token, this meant they weren’t good at actions they had no memory of performing while alive.

The golems are good for tending crops, since I crafted them with the bones of farmers, but fighting’s a different story.

If Terios directly controlled them with a specific vision in mind, as when he

ordered them to do that ballroom dance, he could make them fight like veterans with years of experience, but there was no point in that.

And if I had used the bones of knights, they'd be good at fighting but hopeless in the fields...

That wasn't in-line with his goal of using the labor of bone golems to create a peaceful world. Unable to have it both ways, Terios sighed internally, then replied to Torio's question.

"The thing is, goblins aren't all that powerful. You should be all right so long as fewer than forty attack. If you feel like you're in danger, tear the slips of paper I gave you earlier to call me."

"I guess that's fine, then..." Torio reluctantly backed down after hearing the explanation. It didn't seem like he was upset with Terios and the bone golems. Rather, he must have been frustrated that he was doing nothing but hiding behind the protection of others.

Boys will be boys.

Terios smiled and looked around at the other children. They seemed satisfied, so he stood up.

"Okay, Mira, let's go."

"Okay! ...What?" Mira agreed reflexively, but quickly grew confused.

Before she could say anything else, Torio yelled, "Wait! You're taking Mira?!"

"Yes. As Mira has been studying magic, she should be plenty capable of defeating a goblin or two. It will be a good opportunity to get real battle experience," replied Terios.

"That's not the problem!"

Terios tried to cool the seething boy with logic.

"Please calm down. I'll place powerful defensive magic on her. I swear that not a single hair on her head will be harmed." Trying to lighten the mood, Terios rubbed his smooth, hairless cranium.

But that only resulted in Torio falling deeper into fury.

“Don’t give me that bullshit! It doesn’t matter if she won’t get hurt. There’s no way it’s right to make her fight!”

“No, it will be far better in the future if she gets battle experience now,” explained a bewildered Terios. He hadn’t expected the boy to get so incensed. “I do want to protect all of you, but I can’t always be here to look out for you. I can’t promise that I’ll always be around to help when something happens. That’s why it would be safer for you all to learn how to protect yourselves.”

At the moment, Mira was the only one with any fighting capability, which was why she was the only one tagging along this time. But once all the other children, including Torio, had grown and developed enough to fight, he would provide them with combat experience as well.

“But Mira’s a girl—”

“All the more reason for her to learn to protect herself. Women can face fates far worse than death, unlike men, who are usually just killed and tossed aside.” Terios cut off Torio’s words, laying out the grim truth for the children in as roundabout a way as he could.

“Urgh...” Torio gritted his teeth in frustration and shut his mouth, perhaps unable to construct a rebuttal.

“How childish of you,” said the black cat with a grin.

“It’s up to adults to teach children about reality,” replied Terios coolly before bowing his head to Mira, whose mouth was still agape in shock. “Mira, please accept my apology. I should have inquired as to your opinion on the matter.”

“You don’t have to apologize...”

“Now, I’d like to ask formally. Would you accompany me to defeat the goblins?”

“I...”

Endowed with the authority to make her own decision, Mira looked in uncertainty toward Torio and the other children. They didn’t say anything, but their expressions said she shouldn’t go. Yet, this concern probably nudged her in the opposite direction. She swallowed, as if to gulp down her fright, then

turned quietly to look up at Terios.

“Will I be able to get stronger?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll go.”

“Mira?!” shrieked Torio. Mira apologized to him but took Terios’s hand.

“You used some fancy words to steal the girl a cherry boy loves? Pervert skeletons are the worst.”

“You want to treat me like a pervert that badly?” Terios replied blandly to the black cat’s insult.

As an undead creature, he had no sexual desires, and he had no intention of interfering with Torio’s love life. However, it was technically true that he had taken Mira away from Torio for his own gain.

This, too, is in service of building a peaceful world.

It would be a shame to let someone intelligent, talented in magic, and with a bright future ahead of her go to waste.

Apologizing inwardly to Torio, Terios headed with Mira to defeat the goblins.



They returned to the clearing where they’d found the goblin footprints. A moment before they stepped into the forest, Terios grabbed Mira’s shoulder to stop her.

“Wait a moment, please. *Shield Protection.*” When Terios spoke the words, light spread from his palm and enveloped Mira. “That should keep you safe if a goblin hits you, plus the plants in the forest won’t so much as scratch your skin. I did promise Torio that not a single strand of your hair would be harmed.”

“Thank you.”

While Mira thanked him, Terios cast another spell and pulled a staff made of silver metal from thin air.

“And I’d also like you to take this. It’s not magical or anything, but it’s sturdy and light and should do well as a weapon,” he said.

“Wow, so pretty,” admired Mira, taking the staff. It shone like a mirror.

Atop Mira’s head, the black cat murmured in her usual teasing tone, “That’s a mithril staff. It’s worth only about two thousand gold. Make sure you don’t lose it.”

“Two thousand gold?!”

Mira barely had any opportunities to use silver coins. She couldn’t even fathom exactly how much money that was, but she did understand this was an incredibly valuable object.

“T-Teacher, I can’t accept this!”

“Nonsense, I have ten just like it. Please use it without any worries.” Pushing back the staff that Mira tried to return with shaking hands, Terios forced a tired smile.

He then led the way into the forest, not giving her time to argue about it.

“It’s convenient being a skeleton at times like these. Bugs can’t bite me,” joked Terios as he strode boldly through the forest. The light coming through the canopy above had already dimmed during midday.

Mira gave chase to keep him in her sights, admiring him all the while.

“You can tell which way the goblins went, can’t you?”

While she might have been able to see the tracks at the edge of the forest, the thick interior undergrowth obscured any further signs of activity. However, she had heard that a skilled hunter could track their prey with only some slightly broken twigs or blades of grass.

“Do you happen to have any experience as a hunter?” she asked.

“Well, I guess I was fairly good at hunting.”

“He’s hunted all sorts of things. All. Sorts,” interjected the black cat, meaningfully repeating her words in contrast to Terios’s vague acknowledgment.

Before Mira could inquire further, Terios rushed to elaborate. “Right now, I am not following the sort of tracks a hunter would. Instead, I’m tracing the faint

trail of mana the goblins left behind.”

“A trail of mana?” Mira squinted her eyes but couldn’t see anything of the sort. “Hmm, I can’t tell.”

“A goblin’s mana is very weak, and the trace fades as time passes. You’ll be able to see it with some more training.” He patted her head to console her, then continued in the same tone he took when lecturing.

“Actually, this is a perfect opportunity to explain. The difference between animals and monsters lies in whether they produce mana. Their strength or hostility toward humans is unrelated.”

“What, really?!” Mira’s eyes widened in surprise. Astonishingly, monsters weren’t always fearsome creatures that attacked humans.

“For example,” continued Terios, “it’s incredibly rare for a dragon to assail a human unless they enter its den. Dragons have incredible amounts of mana, so they are monsters. Additionally, while bears are far more powerful than goblins, they are simply animals because they lack mana.”

“Really? So if they don’t have mana, they’re animals, and if they do, they’re monsters?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Mira nodded in understanding, and Terios added to his explanation.

“Animals also have souls, but they can’t produce mana. Hypothetically, if they suddenly developed the ability to create mana, they would be considered a monster.”

“But then—”

If I have mana, unlike normal people, does that make me the same as a monster? She desperately swallowed the question before it could leap from her mouth.

However, Terios seemed to have anticipated her question. He gently patted her head again.

“Unfortunately, there are some people in the world who fear monsters and magic users in equal measure. But there’s something you need to remember: As

long as you hold on to your kind heart, you will always, without a doubt, be human.”

“Okay,” said Mira, smiling back, happy that Terios was being kind to her. But in one far corner of her heart, a doubt grew: *If I lose my kind heart, will I not be human anymore?*

Just as villains of the worst kind were deemed *inhuman*, those who lost their heart’s humanity might no longer belong in the category of *human*.

Someone who is no longer human...

Curious to know what that meant but unwilling to think about it, Mira fell silent, battered by conflicting emotions.

Thinking she might be upset again, Terios made a show of laughing cheerfully with a clatter of his teeth.

“You know, there are kindhearted monsters in the world, like me. I wouldn’t mind if people treated me like one.”

“The only people who claim they’re kindhearted are con men and members of the clergy. Be wary of them all,” said the black cat, wagging her tail like a finger as she warned Mira against Terios, though he seemed proud of himself.

She couldn’t help but laugh at how funny their arguments were.

“Ha-ha!”

“I’m just happy you’re feeling better. But we need to remain quiet from here on out,” said Terios.

“Is that—?” Mira raised her voice in alarm but quickly clamped her hand over her mouth and nodded to show she understood.

He nodded back and continued forward, careful not to make a noise. They continued for a short while, and the forest began to thin. There, they came upon the mouth of a dark cave in the sloped side of the mountain. Sitting in front of the cave was a humanlike figure.

Small and green-skinned, it wore only a loincloth and had pointed ears. No hair grew from its scalp.

Is that a goblin...? wondered Mira.

“Yes, that is a completely ordinary goblin.”

“Ah?!”

Terios’s voice rang out in her mind as she tried desperately to hold back the cry that almost escaped.

“Apologies, this is a spell called Telepathy, which allows us to share our thoughts. I should have explained it earlier,” he stated.

The black cat shot over a thought after Terios’s apology, an evil look on her face. *“At its most extreme, it allows the user to do some pretty sleazy stuff, like reading someone’s thoughts without their permission.”*

Mira held back a laugh and smiled, then turned to stare at the goblin again. *“You said it’s a ‘completely normal goblin.’ Does that mean there are more unusual ones?”* she asked.

“Yes. They aren’t as varied as humans, but they are still a species with quite a bit of variation. There are some stronger types called warriors or kings,” answered Terios.

“Those ones are big, ’bout as big as an adult human, so you can easily tell them apart,” added the cat.

“I see.”

Mira nodded and looked at the goblin in front of the cave, but its height didn’t seem all that different from her own. What Terios had said about her being able to defeat a goblin might actually be true.

“All right, then, Mira, please slay that goblin,” said Terios.

“Uh, all by myself?”

“Yes. It won’t be good practice unless you do.”

Mira was left bewildered, but the cat moved off her head, and Terios gently pushed on her back.

“Me? Beat a goblin?”

The goblin yawned leisurely. Apparently, it still hadn’t noticed they were

observing it from the shadows of the trees.

That would mean in order to defeat it herself—she would have to kill it.

It's okay. I can do this, she assured herself as she gripped the mithril staff more tightly, her heart pounding so loud she could hardly bear it.

Mira had twisted the necks of chickens they'd raised and eradicated pests ravaging the crops. She'd taken plenty of lives so far. This was no different. It just looked similar to a human, and it had the strength to kill her as well. But that was the only difference.

"Huff, huff..." Mira struggled to calm herself, but her breathing remained ragged.

As she did, Terios's voice suddenly echoed inside her mind.

"It's certainly possible that goblin brought the green rot with it."

"...What?"

Frozen in place like a pillar of ice, Mira struggled to comprehend what he had just said. Terios explained dispassionately.

"The green rot can only infect humans and can't be spread through plants and animals. But there are some exceptions—monsters."

"Monsters...can carry the green rot?"

"Yes. And goblins do have green skin. Long ago, the green rot was called the goblin plague. A huge military was mobilized to eliminate them."

"....."

His words only half reached Mira as she stood in silence.

That goblin brought the green rot?

And that's why she, Torio, and the other children suffered so much, why the other villagers turned into green corpses, why her mother went to get help and never returned.

It's this goblin's fault.

It felt like something snapped inside her brain the moment she came to that

realization. All her distaste for killing disappeared. Mira got so hot, it felt like she was burning, and that filled her with an emotion that rarely came to gentle girls—rage.

“Graaaaaaaah!”

The next moment, Mira realized she was roaring and rushing out from where she hid in the shadows of the trees. She leveled her staff at the goblin, which jumped to its feet in surprise, and shouted.

“Fireball!”

The spell she’d practiced so many times on the stump went off without a hitch. Unfortunately, the violently burning sphere slipped past the goblin as the creature quickly twisted out of the way. The fireball struck the edge of the cave’s entrance and burst in a shower of sparks.

It dodged?!

Unlike a stump, living opponents moved. As Mira gritted her teeth and berated herself for forgetting such an obvious fact, the words of an elderly hunter came to mind.

“Remember, miss: The most skilled hunters aren’t the ones who shoot at their prey from far away. They’re the ones who close in and shoot from a distance from which they know they can’t miss.”

That’s it. I have to get closer.

Luckily, Mira wouldn’t need to close the distance between them. Enraged by the attack, the goblin picked up a spear with a crude stone spearhead and moved in to attack Mira.

Closer. Let it get closer.

The tiny calm part of herself chided her hastier self for wanting to cast the spell so soon. Once the goblin had closed in so much that another two steps would put it in range to use its spear, Mira quickly shouted.

“Fireball!”

It didn’t have time to react to dodge the second fireball. The spell slammed into the goblin’s chest and exploded.

“Gyah!” The goblin shrieked and fell to the ground, the flesh on its chest ripping apart and sending blood flying everywhere. The wound was severe enough to spell the creature’s doom, but it wasn’t the kind that would kill immediately.

As it writhed on the ground in pain, she didn’t know whether to feel bad for it or fear that it would use the last of its strength to retaliate. In any case, she found herself walking over to its side, pointing her staff at its head, and murmuring, *“Fireball.”*

The point-blank fireball destroyed the goblin’s skull, igniting its brain matter. Its body convulsed for a few seconds, and then the green creature moved no more.

“...I beat it.” Mira sighed in relief and let the tension drain from her shoulders. That was when it happened.

“Grah, grah!”

An enraged shout accompanied a blow to her backside, which sent her tumbling to the ground.

There’s more?!

A goblin hiding inside the cave must have heard the commotion and rushed out. Mira didn’t even have time to regret how foolish she was for not only missing her initial shot against the first goblin but also lacking the caution to anticipate this turn of events.

The newly appeared goblin jumped on her and raised a crude stone hatchet.

I’m going to die.

Just as the fear struck her, her body moved out of survival instinct.

“Graaaaaah!”

Roaring, she struck the goblin’s face with the mithril staff as hard as she could. The blow lacked almost any power, both because of her weak upper body and because being on the ground with the goblin on top of her put her in a bad position to fight. But as luck would have it, she struck its jaw, causing a slight concussion. It ceased the downward swing of its stone hatchet.

Without letting her momentary opening go to waste, she yelled with all her strength.

“Fireball!”

At point-blank range, she cast another fireball, which blasted into the goblin’s face.

Charred flesh and blood rained down on Mira where she lay, but an invisible force repelled it the moment before it dirtied her pale face.



Oh, right, Teacher cast that protection spell on me.

She'd completely forgotten in the heat of the moment, but her life was never actually at risk.

But if it weren't for his spell, that attack from behind would surely have...

Rather than simply knocking her over, it might have taken her life immediately. A shiver ran up her spine at the thought. Then she managed to extract herself from under the headless goblin and stand.

She glanced into the cave and noticed a number of goblins running out toward her.

How many are there...? How many more times can I use Fireball?

She tried to think things through, but her body felt heavy and her mind slow, perhaps because she'd used too much magic. She did her best to raise her staff before two goblins leaped at her at the same time, and she—

"You did very well," came the sound of warm praise, along with two hands of bone that shot from behind and grabbed the leaping goblins by their necks to raise them higher.

"Teacher!"

"Defeating two goblins is plenty for your first fight. Let's wrap up today's battle practice with that," said Terios.

"Aw, you're too soft on her. She could probably do another three if she thought she was going to die." The black cat sighed as Terios squeezed his hands.

That was all it took to produce a dull crack, and the two goblins hanging by their necks fell limp like rag dolls.

"Gyah?!"

The other three goblins that emerged from behind those two seemed to sense they were no match for the robed skeleton. They turned and tried to flee, but their decision came too late.

"Stone Spike."

When he muttered the incantation, a spear of stone thrust from the ground directly below the feet of each goblin, skewering them from bottom to top. They expired before they even knew what was happening.

“Humanoid creatures have a high point of view, so they tend to neglect caution for what’s around their feet. Hitting a moving opponent like this is somewhat difficult, but it’s an invaluable strategy for surprise attacks. Make sure to remember that,” said Terios.

“Yes, Teacher.”

She replied simply as Terios calmly lectured her in front of the grotesque shish-kebabbed corpses, spurring a thought.

I’ve become a cruel girl.

While she had been blinded with rage, she did kill two goblins with her own hands, but the guilt she had expected wasn’t coming. Not to mention the scattered bodies of the goblins that Terios had slain. She didn’t feel nauseous, despite the smell of blood hanging so thick in the air, you could choke on it.

“Teacher, I—”

I’m not really a normal girl. Before she could choke out that admission of defeat, Terios gently patted her head.

“You’ve eliminated one threat to the village. Let’s do another job to protect everyone’s peace.”

There was no lie in his words. But instinctually, Mira knew it was a lie to distract from the fundamental problem at hand. Nonetheless—

“Okay, I’ll do my best.” Mira nodded energetically. She and Terios turned toward the entrance of the cave to defeat the remaining goblins.



In front of the cave, which gradually sloped down into the ground, Terios asked a question of the girl who stood next to him.

“How do you think we should defeat the goblins hiding inside?”

“Uh... Can’t we just go in and beat them when we find them?”

“Nope. Unfortunately, that’s only two points for you.”

“Huh?!”

Though Mira was upset at receiving a failing grade, Terios went on to thoroughly explain.

“The goblins know the inside of this cave like the backs of their hands. Not only are they inevitably hiding in the shadows to surprise attack us, but they’ve probably also set up traps, like pitfalls. It wouldn’t be wise to just waltz into their home base.”

“Oh, I see.” Mira realized how thoughtless she’d been and reflected on her answer. Happy to see her reconsidering, Terios asked her again.

“So knowing that, how do you think we should defeat the goblins?”

“Ummm, if we can’t go inside, then what about waiting for them to come out?”

“Good, that’s not a bad idea.”

If you had enough power, that was probably the safest strategy. He didn’t think the goblins had stores of food and water in the cave, so they could crush the goblins when starvation forced them out.

“However,” noted Terios, “we lack the manpower to take shifts watching the cave, and it will take time for the goblins to run out of food. That strategy isn’t ideal when you’re short on numbers or in a hurry.”

“Okay, then we’ll need to think of a way to make the goblins come out quickly...” Taking in Terios’s points, Mira immediately started thinking of a better strategy.

She is a wonderful student, thought Terios, suddenly feeling very much like a real teacher. Then he proposed a strategy of his own.

“The quickest option would be collapsing the entrance and sealing the cave.”

“Ah, we can do that?!”

“Indeed. It’s not like we particularly want to investigate inside the cave. We can easily destroy the goblins by burying them alive.”

This strategy minimized the most risk and spilled the most enemy blood with the least amount of work on their part. He was trying to instill in Mira that it was essential to always think outside the box.

“However,” said Terios, “that strategy also has its flaws. If the cave has other entrances, they could escape through those. Additionally, if a monster more powerful than a goblin were inside the cave, it might be able to dig through the wall to escape.”

“So what should we do?” asked Mira, seemingly unable to come up with any other ideas. As if he were waiting for that moment, Terios brought out the other strategy he’d set aside.

“There are a few options available, but I’ve got just the thing this time,” he said, casting a spell to pull out a large rucksack. “Inside this bag is dried smokeweed that was soaked in the paralytic toxin of a poisonous toad.”

The base ingredient of smokeweed was tobacco. When lit, it produced large amounts of smoke, which carried the component it was soaked in.

“If we use that...”

“We can suffocate them with poisonous fumes.”

Mira paled, while Terios was all smiles.

“I don’t believe the cave is that large,” he said. “The smoke should be able to fill all the cracks and crevices and leave no goblin behind. Plus, if there are other entrances to the cave, we can easily locate them from where the smoke exits.”

He turned to the corpse of one of the goblins whose neck he’d crushed and quietly cast a spell.

“Empty body devoid of life, take this makeshift soul and become my servant —*Create Flesh Golem.*”

This was the same magic he’d used to create the bone golems, though the fresh body of a recently killed creature served as its medium instead of cremated bones.

With its makeshift soul, the goblin body stood, its neck bent irregularly, and shouldered the rucksack of poisonous smokeweed.

Terios lit the sack, and the corpse walked into the cave, trailing smoke.

“And with that, we’re done. Sure, preparing smokeweed in advance took labor, but the most important thing in combat isn’t what you do on the battlefield; it’s what preparations you make before you head there. You must always anticipate a variety of scenarios and do your best to prepare for them.”

He gazed at Mira, quite satisfied that he had taught such a valuable lesson, but the smile on her face betrayed not admiration but confusion.

“Um, I sort of felt like this before, but you’re kind of, um...”

“The kind of rotten person who will do whatever it takes to achieve their goal? Yeah, you shouldn’t imitate him,” jeered the cat, who had been silent up until now, bluntly airing what Mira struggled to put into words.

“How rude. I don’t have anything left to rot on my body. I’m smooth—clean as bone!”

“Y-yeah,” said Mira, but her perplexed smile only deepened at Terios’s attempt to subtly change the subject with a bone joke.

“What kind of adult needs a child to be so careful with his feelings? Aren’t you embarrassed?” asserted the cat.

“Please, no more. You’ll kill my soul. Give me a break.” Terios winced, shaking his head at the cat’s merciless jab. He couldn’t feel physical pain as an undead, but emotional pain was fair game.

In stark contrast to them joking around, goblin screams began to ring out from inside the cave.

“Grah, grah?!”

“Gack, gaaah...”

The goblins must have breathed in the smoke laced with paralytic poison while being distracted by the body of their companion racing toward them, spewing fire and ash. With their bodies paralyzed, they couldn’t even run. Soon, they wouldn’t be able to breathe and would suffocate.

Mira’s innocent face clouded over as she listened to their death rattles.

“We had no other options,” she muttered, almost to herself, and Terios nodded firmly.

“You’re right. Building a peaceful world and eliminating things that undermine peace are the same thing. That’s why I will destroy anything that harms humans, be it disease or monster.”

As he’d told Mira on a number of occasions, he’d decided never to kill another human being. But he also had no intention of saving the life of anything that wasn’t human. The possibility of building a paradise where all creatures could live harmoniously vanished the moment life evolved to eat. The process of killing and consuming another being to efficiently gain energy made an equal utopia impossible.

“Are you disappointed?” he asked. While his goal to create a peaceful world was beautiful, the path toward it was dyed red with blood.

If Mira continued working with him, she would likely end up seeing even more horrific things in the future. Despite Terios’s question implying that she should limit her involvement with him if she were disappointed, she shook her head.

“No. I want to see the peaceful world you’ll make, too.”

“Thank you, Mira.” Her brilliant, carefree smile made him feel guilty, but he grinned back.

With the screams from the cave having cut off, Terios stepped toward the entrance, intending to check it just in case. As he did, his sharp senses picked up the presence of a powerful monster.

“Mira, please fall back behind me,” he said.

“O-okay.”

Likely sensing the urgency of the situation, Mira and the black cat retreated a significant distance.

“The fact that the goblins came to spy on the village did make me think they had a boss ordering them around,” murmured Terios, the monster in question slowly appearing from the depths of the cave.

Though it looked small because it was hunched over, it was as tall as a large

bear. The red of blood, the black of mud, and a green that resembled mold dyed the fur covering the entirety of its body, making it impossible to determine its original color. A fat, whiplike tail lashed behind it, the ears on its head twitched, and its bloodshot eyes locked onto Terios. That creature was—

“A wererat? How unusual.”

“Kya-ha-ha.”

It almost seemed to take Terios’s words as a compliment. The wererat, a human warped into a half-beast by some curse or disease, bared its long front teeth and laughed.

Although the creature was a fair distance from her, the stench coming from its body was so horrible, it caused Mira to clamp a hand over her mouth, a wave of nausea hitting her.

“Sewer rats are cleaner than this thing,” spat the black cat, screwing up her face in discomfort as she waved a paw to fan away the smell.

Terios kept an eye on the two behind him but secretly sighed in frustration.

And so, my lie has turned to truth.

When he’d told Mira the goblins were likely the source of the green-rot infection, he was really just lying to spur her into action. It was true that people suspected they were the source of the disease due to their skin color, which had caused a large-scale effort to eliminate them in the past. However, experiments conducted at that time revealed that goblins were incapable of carrying the green rot, no matter the situation.

One other thing he’d told Mira was also true—that while the green rot typically only infected humans, there were some exceptions among monsters. Goblins, like the majority of other monsters, couldn’t become infected. Half-human beasts like the wererat in front of him now were the very rare exception, as they could carry the green rot because they were originally human. These monsters developed a constitution so strong that even poison wouldn’t work on them, meaning they could coexist with the disease instead of dying from it.

“You’re the fiend that brought the green rot to Krio Village, aren’t you?”

Terios didn't need to ask, considering the green patches across the creature's fur, but he wanted to confirm at least.

At that, the wererat chattered its teeth in another laugh and nodded.

"Kya-ha-ha."

"This is who made Momma and everyone else—!" Though Mira still suffered from the horrific smell, her face turned bright red with rage. Terios didn't need to turn back to know what was happening.

He tried to verify one last thing before Mira exploded in anger.

"May I ask why?"

But no response ever came.

"Kya-haaaa!" Perhaps having tired of the pointless conversation, the wererat let out a strange cry and leaped into the air as it attacked Terios.

"Teacher?!" screamed Mira. She had no way of knowing this, but wererats were among the most specialized in killing humans of all the monsters.

Their physical abilities weren't that powerful, probably only equivalent to a seasoned warrior's. But if it scratched a human just once with its sharp claws or spat on them or even just breathed on them, it could infect them with all sorts of deadly diseases.

This mass of horrific diseases could kill even a demigod hero, assuming they didn't have any medicine on hand. That's what made the wererats so dangerous. However—

"I do apologize. You see, I'm just a skeleton," said Terios. He had already died long ago, and diseases meant nothing to an undead. As such, he calmly caught the wererat by the arm as it tried to attack him.

He quietly voiced a spell to eliminate this diseased mass that brought nothing but misfortune to humans.

"Cremation."

A blazing scarlet hellfire engulfed the wererat's whole body, along with Terios's hand as he held it.

“Kyaaa!”

The scorching column of fire burned the wererat’s screaming, disease-ridden body from this world. When the flames died down, only a black burn remained.

“Phew...” Terios cracked his neck, a habit he’d had since he was alive, then slowly turned to look back at Mira and bowed his head. “Mira, I’ve stolen your revenge from you, and for that, I apologize.”

“Uh, no, you don’t have to apologize for that!” Mira lost her composure, wildly waving her hands at the unexpected apology.

She trotted up to Terios, took his still-warm hand of bone, and smiled a smile that could make flowers bloom.

“Thank you for avenging everyone,” she said.

“Mira, I was only—”

He tried to clarify that he was only doing it to achieve a peaceful world, that he wasn’t trying to avenge anyone, but Mira shook her head to stop him.

“You saved us and avenged Momma, no matter the reason. Thank you. I really mean it.”

“...You’re welcome.” Feeling a sense of discomfort that he’d long since forgotten, Terios scratched his cheek in embarrassment but accepted Mira’s thanks regardless.

The black cat’s whiskers quivered as she laughed and mocked them. “Seems like vengeance pairs best with hypocrisy! It’s more fun for me to watch that way!”

“That’s the worst reason possible,” snarled Terios, glaring at the cat for being a selfish bystander.

“I like that Ms. Cat never lies,” added Mira, a wry smile accompanying her clumsy compliment.

After checking the cave to confirm there were no remaining monsters alive, they returned to Krio Village, where everyone waited.



CHAPTER 3 | Maiden of the God of Fire

On the southern side of the Erythron Kingdom, around the single road that led to another nation, lay a region filled with numerous bubbling bogs. The kingdom valued the mires as a shield that made movement difficult for large militaries, but they also proved a nuisance to wagons bearing goods. This earned the ire of many merchants.

In those southern bogs, there were currently a number of metal-armor-clad royal knights astride horses.

“Is this the area mentioned in the report?”

“Yes, Captain Diné.”

Leading the group was Captain Diné, a red-haired female knight. Answering her question was the lieutenant, a balding, middle-aged male knight.

“It attacked a group of merchants, resulting in the death of one attendant and one horse,” he said.

“I see.”

Diné dismounted from her horse as she listened to the lieutenant, then reached into the foliage growing thick on either side of the narrow road. She pulled out a tattered set of reins, likely belonging to the horse that had been killed.

“Looks like this is the place. Troops, guard the horses,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am!”

Her accompanying knights dismounted at once, drew their swords, and turned their eyes to the bog surrounding them.

“The number of living creatures we have here should be plenty to draw it out.”

In complete contrast to her nervous troops, Diné stood at ease, seeming almost carefree while waiting patiently for the enemy.

Ripples appeared on the surface of the gray-colored bog water, and the thing

surfaced with a splash.

Its transparent body looked clouded and dirty, perhaps due to the bog water, but they could still see the wriggling of the sizeable red nucleus suspended inside. This creature was a pure, unadulterated monster, an unintelligent being that ran on simple instinct. The entirety of its body was formed from digestive juices, which it used to consume and dissolve prey.

“There you are, slime.”

“I-it’s massive?!”

While Diné quietly invoked its name, her troops looked up at the slime and uttered cries of disbelief.

Normally, slimes were only about as big as a medium-sized dog. They couldn’t easily kill you, as long as they didn’t manage to attach themselves to your face. Yet, the slime that stood before them now was as large as a single-family home. It was big enough to swallow an entire horse whole, let alone a human.

“Looks like you’re just a fat cow of a slime after all,” Diné remarked, but the creature didn’t have a brain with which it could understand her insult.

However, it might have instinctually sensed her hostility. It swung its imposing, bulbous body straight at her.

“Thanks. Now I don’t have to get my boots dirty.”

Smiling at the fact that she wouldn’t have to go into the bog, Diné nodded to her troops, ordering them to fall back with the horses.

In response, the slime rose up like a wave about to crash down, perhaps thinking she would make fine prey all alone.

“Captain?!” reflexively cried a greenhorn knight.

Cutting the monster’s digestive-juice body with a sword or stabbing it with a spear did nothing, making them dangerous opponents for anyone who couldn’t use fire or ice magic. They did die if you pierced their nucleus, however, so normal-size slimes could be brought down. But the thick, massive specimen in front of them would swallow and dissolve anyone whole before their weapon could reach the core.

Despite the greenhorn knight's vision of catastrophe, the other knights remained cool and collected.

"It's big, all right. But it's still a worthless slime."

"What's the point in attacking the strongest person?"

The tall wave of a slime moved to smother Diné in front of the flabbergasted knights. Showing no signs of hurrying, she drew her favored sword from the sheath at her waist.

"Erupt, Vulcanus!" The white blade responded to Diné's call and burned a bright red. Since the weapon emitted enough heat to evaporate magma, she swung it at the monster's huge body. The digestive juices instantly boiled away at the absurdly high temperatures and exploded, splattering the slime's body across the area.

"What?!" A greenhorn knight exclaimed as Diné jumped lightly and smashed the exposed nucleus of the slime.

"Sorry. Are any of you hurt?"

After landing among the lifeless and placid acidic liquid, Diné inquired about her troops' condition. She should have been drenched in acid, but there weren't any signs of damage on her white skin or red hair. After all, the mana that surrounded her body was so powerful that she didn't even need to cast defensive magic on herself. No way would an attack from a mere slime break through that.

"Incredible..." A drop of acid landed on the cheek of the greenhorn knight, but he didn't notice the stinging pain while trembling out of sheer awe. "So this is the power of the holy knight, a descendant of a god..."

The scions of gods, holy knights possessed unnatural levels of mana and used a divine weapon bequeathed by their parents.

All the citizens of Erythron Kingdom knew the name and achievements of their holy knight, but this was the first time the greenhorn knight had actually seen her power in person. He couldn't contain his growing excitement.

Diné noticed his gaze and smiled bashfully, then returned her now-white

sword to its sheath.

“All right, let’s hurry home so we can take baths. I’m not going to get any men smelling like this,” she announced.

“I thought that was normal for you,” ribbed the lieutenant, not holding back against his commander, who had remained unmarried even into her twenties. The truth of the matter was that her intimidating strength often obscured her beauty.

The other troops let out large guffaws at the insult. Diné shook a fist in their direction in feigned anger as she mounted her horse and spurred it off toward the capital.



She returned to her manor at noon, two days later. A messenger arrived from the castle as she was in the bath, washing off the grime from traveling and fighting.

“Lady Diné, His Majesty requests your presence immediately.”

“I gotcha,” replied Diné through the bathroom door as she dried her wet red hair with a towel, a wrinkle between her brows.

I’ve got a bad feeling about this, seeing as they couldn’t even wait until after I was done taking a bath for the report.

Diné did not need much in the way of preparation, as she was already planning to report to the king about the slime she defeated in the bog, so she was able to quickly gather her equipment and head off in a carriage with an attendant.

Perhaps because the country was naturally protected by geographical features, it prioritized appearances over defense. Diné entered the exquisite Erythron Castle, exchanging greetings with nobles and other knights she passed in the halls as she headed toward the office where the king waited.

“Your Majesty, I present to you the holy knight Diné, captain of the Second Knight Squadron.”

“Enter.”

A sweet voice replied to the attendant's knock, one that vainly attempted a majestic tone.

Having received permission, the attendant opened the door. Diné bowed and entered the room, where she faced a small boy sitting in a large chair. She waited for the door to close and the attendant to move away before she smiled.

"I've returned, Your Majesty," she said.

"Welcome back, Diné," said Calyx, boy king of the Erythron Kingdom, running up to Diné with a huge smile on his face. "I heard you went to defeat a monster. You weren't hurt, were you?"



“No, as you can see, I am completely unharmed,” said Diné proudly as the boy looked up at her with concern.

He blushed at the faint scent of soap coming from Diné but let out a sigh of relief.

“Good. I’d die from sorrow if anything happened to you,” he said.

“That’s an exaggeration.” Diné made herself look severe, though she was happy that Calyx cared enough to cry.

“Also, Your Majesty, have I not told you three times now that you shouldn’t speak so casually?”

The former king died a year ago from a sudden illness, which led to his son, Calyx, ascending the throne. He was simply a figurehead, as the real work would be handled by the ministers until he came of age, but that made maintaining his air of royalty all the more critical.

He pouted at Diné’s remark.

“But it makes me sound like my father, all stiff and stuffy. I speak formally in front of other people, so at least let me talk how I want to when I’m with just you, Diné.”

“No, Your Majesty. Just as with practicing swordplay, the more one slacks under normal circumstances, the more likely one is to make mistakes when the time comes.” Though she thought he looked cute while he was pouting, she firmly held her ground.

Calyx’s face clouded over with anger.

“Everyone would listen to everything my father said, but no one listens to me because they think it’s just petty selfishness. If that’s how—”

“Your Majesty.”

Diné quietly but firmly cut off Calyx’s words.

“That’s the one thing the ruler of a country must never say.”

“I-I’m sorry...” He hung his head, upset at being truly scolded for the first time in so long. He raised his head again and looked at Diné with tears in his eyes. “I

won't ever complain like that again. And I'll speak properly. Just, please, when it's only the two of us, don't call me Your Majesty. It sounds so cold."

When the previous king was still alive, the two of them called each other by their names and were as close as a real brother and sister. Those memories were among the young boy's happiest, so he probably didn't want their relationship as king and subject to ruin them.

"You've been a spoiled child since the beginning, King Calyx. You'll get me into trouble one day," she replied.

"Diné!" A huge grin appeared on the boy's face at being called by his name. As soon as his sister called him by his name, albeit with an exasperated grin, the boy's face lit up.

Just as Diné was about to pat the head of her dear young friend, her sharp hearing caught the sound of footsteps approaching.

"Your Majesty, please take your seat," she said.

"O-okay."

Based on her now-serious expression, Calyx guessed that someone was coming. While he was upset to have his respite interrupted, he put on a face suited to a king and returned to his seat.

As he did, there was a knock at the door along with a deep voice.

"Your Majesty, it's Gelan."

"Enter."

With Calyx's permission, a portly middle-aged man entered the room. This was Prime Minister Gelan, who held the political reins to the kingdom in the young monarch's place. He was the much younger brother of the former king, making him Calyx's uncle.

"Holy Knight Diné, you took your time returning. While you were busy playing in the bog, our kingdom has come under immediate danger," spat Gelan.

"My deepest apologies."

His words were quite rude to be directed at a knight who'd just returned from

duty, but Diné simply apologized, not showing a hint of annoyance.

The two of them hadn't gotten along for a long time, but that didn't change the fact that he was part of the royal family and expertly conducted his work as prime minister. Besides, the unpleasantness wasn't enough to ruffle her feathers.

On the other hand, Calyx admired her and couldn't stand to see her treated that way.

"Uncle, you speak too harshly! Diné has just returned from a mission to eliminate a monster for the safety of the people. You can't—"

"Your Majesty, did my brother not teach you that a king must prioritize matters of importance over the small?"

While Gelan's words sounded logical, they were nothing more than a bad-faith argument to distract from the real issue.

It's not like Diné had gone off on her own accord to defeat the slime in the southern bogs. She went on the orders of General Chelidon, the highest-ranking person in the royal military and captain of the First Knight Squadron. If there was an issue while she was gone, the blame should have fallen on the general for ordering her to go.

But Calyx was too young and inexperienced to come up with a logical counterargument like that.

"B-but Diné—"

"Your Majesty, I appreciate your concern, but the unfairness of unnecessarily covering for one of your retainers could result in the country falling to ruin. Please leave it be," responded Diné coldly, cutting off Calyx as he tried to defend her again.

Gelan smiled satisfactorily at the sight.

"Oh, I would have thought you'd take advantage of your friendly relationship with the king, but it seems you do know your place," he said.

Diné wanted nothing more than to yell that it was for Calyx's sake, not Gelan's. Instead, she bit back her impulse and added another emotionless

comment.

“Additionally, the prime minister is nothing more than your retainer. When in public, you should refer to him by his name or title rather than Uncle.”

“Understood. From now on, I will call him Gelan,” said Calyx.

“...That is perfectly acceptable,” said Gelan.

As Calyx wasn't aware that his decision to address his uncle without his title was a counterattack on Diné's part, Gelan smiled painfully and nodded in response.

She felt a small amount of satisfaction at seeing that strained grin, but then she turned the conversation back on track.

“Now, what is this immediate danger?”

“You're aware of the village that was destroyed by disease?”

“You mean Krio Village. I couldn't possibly forget.” Pain lined her face as she responded to Gelan's question.

Diné and her group, the Second Knight Squadron, were primarily responsible for defeating monsters, so they hadn't been involved, but she knew the royal military had viciously struck down every villager who sought help after they contracted the green rot. If they hadn't done that, the disease would have spread, and it could have meant the end of the Erythron Kingdom.

She didn't think sacrificing the few to save the many was the wrong decision. However, that didn't eliminate the guilt she felt for abandoning the people she was supposed to protect.

While Diné reeled from another wave of guilt, Gelan revealed a horrifying detail without so much as flinching.

“A lich has appeared in the village.”

“What?!” Diné yelled out involuntarily, thinking she might have misheard.

Gelan repeated himself coldly, as if he were reprimanding her. “A lich has, in fact, appeared in the village. If you doubt me, you can personally ask the soldiers who went to investigate the settlement.” As he spoke, he took a sheet

of parchment from his inner pocket and handed it to Diné.

“Is this the report from the soldiers who went to the village?” questioned Diné.

According to the report, they had first sent a few prisoners to Krio Village, where there should have been no one left alive after such a long period of outbreak. They were told that if they burned the corpses that remained in the village to cut off the source of infection, their sentences would be reduced.

There was only a single, forest-enclosed path that ran from Krio Village to another nearby village, so no one feared the prisoners escaping. Even if they did run, they’d only end up becoming food for the forest and its denizens.

And so the soldiers blocked the road and waited. Eventually, the prisoners returned, their faces pale. Apparently, the village was teeming with monsters, skeletons specifically.

Skeletons? They sometimes arise naturally at battlefields, but this has to be the work of a necromancer.

While it was warm and early summer, there hadn’t been enough time for the flesh of the deceased villagers to rot away and leave only their skeletons behind. With that in mind, it was safer to assume someone had intentionally burned the bodies and put their bones to use.

The soldiers had thought the same thing as Diné, so they went to the village themselves to see with their own eyes. Along with the numerous skeletons, they saw a black-robed lich leading young children around.

“Children? There are still living children there?!”

“They were most likely kidnapped from somewhere to be used in a sacrificial ritual. That, or the soldiers saw it wrong,” answered Gelan lazily to Diné’s cry of surprise.

The soldiers had seen the lich from quite far away, which was when they had fallen back.

If that had indeed been a lich—an undead magic user—so powerful they could create an entire army of skeletons, then even a hundred normal soldiers

together wouldn't have been enough. The soldiers had been wise to flee, placing the priority on reporting back. But that meant the details of the situation remained unclear, including the status of the children.

I don't blame the soldiers, but I wish I had more information to judge its strength by.

Lich was a vague term that applied to any intelligent, undead creature that could use magic, so there could be huge disparities in their strength. Some were weak enough that normal soldiers could defeat them. Then there were Undead Kings, beings so powerful that they could wipe out an entire country.

As a holy knight and a descendant of a god, Diné had fought against many an undead creature, as well as many a criminal magic user. Though she had not specifically battled a lich, she had no intentions of letting one get the upper hand over her.

But if it's an Undead King of legend...

Her expression darkened as she sank into thought, envisioning the worst possible situation, before Gelan melodramatically gave her an order.

"Either way, this monster is clearly a threat to the kingdom. Holy Knight Diné, you will travel to the village and defeat the lich that has made its base there."

"....."

"What, are you scared?" said Gelan, trying to provoke Diné when she failed to respond immediately.

But she didn't lose herself to anger. Instead, she calmly asked, "What's become of the green rot?"

If the infectious disease that had destroyed Krio Village was still there, Diné wouldn't be able to come back alive.

While she was a descendant of a god and had massive amounts of mana, she was still human in the end. While a cold wouldn't get her down, she didn't have the strength to bounce back from one of the top-five most dangerous diseases on the continent.

Besides, Diné's expertise lay in swords, not magic. She was incapable of using

the kind of magic you would need to cure someone of the green rot.

“I will cut down anything, even a lich, with Vulcanus, the blade of the God of Fire. But I cannot slice through a formless disease,” she stated.

“Diné...,” said Calyx, concerned. The woman smiled in reply, urging him not to worry, and he fixed a serious expression back on his face.

In response to Diné, Gelan again tried to provoke her.

“You act all high-and-mighty, but you’re really just a coward protecting herself. The descendants of Vulcanus would be disgusted.”

The moment Gelan invoked the god’s name, Diné drew the sword at her hip and held it to his throat.

“You may call me a coward if you wish—that has its truth—but you should be prepared to die if you insult my god,” she said.

“—?!”

Sweat dripped from Gelan’s brow as he finally faced real hostility from Diné.

He was merely a middle-aged man. If she ignited the sword named after her ancestor, not even his bones would be left behind.

Seeing the potentially explosive situation between the holy knight and the prime minister, the young king cried out.

“Diné, stop!”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I apologize.” Apologizing to Calyx, not to Gelan, for allowing him to see her like that, she sheathed her sword.

Ignoring the prime minister as he calmed himself, she turned toward the exit.

“I’m off to slay the lich,” she said.

“Wait, Diné!”

She had just said that she would die if the green rot still remained.

Smiling gently to Calyx, she said, “I swear to return.”

With that white lie, Diné left the room without giving Calyx a moment to respond.

So my next opponent is a lich, then.

She strode down the castle halls, turning the situation over quickly in her mind.

I don't like that I don't know how powerful it is, but I guess that's no different from usual.

It wasn't uncommon for her to be on a mission to exterminate goblins and have an ogre pop out, too. That wasn't just with monsters, either. Diné had never once in her life been in a battle against a human opponent who she had totally figured out, where she was absolutely certain of victory.

There was no other choice but to prepare as she typically did and fight with everything she had.

The bigger problem is the green rot.

As she had told Calyx and Gelan, a lich she could cut down was one thing, but a disease was out of her league.

I've heard you can get infected by breathing it in, so perhaps covering my nose and mouth with a cloth and wearing a disease-warding amulet will grant some protection against it. Though at the end of the day, it will probably do nothing more than ease my mind.

She let out a heavy sigh, realizing she wasn't good at handling opponents she couldn't cut down with her sword.

I wish there was a cure for it.

Unfortunately, Erythron Kingdom had no medicine for curing the green rot. Other countries probably didn't have much, either. That was because the green rot was thought to have been eliminated a whole two hundred years ago.

That was the time of Massacre King Aeon, a man who had attempted to conquer the entire continent of Trokhia. His campaign had spared no nation, and you could have built mountains with the corpses of the millions he had killed. But because he had burned all the bodies of those infected, he had eliminated the green rot from the continent.

But this was no heroic yarn; rather, it was a story that illustrated the extent of

the Massacre King's tyranny. He wouldn't just burn the bodies of the infected dead; he'd also torch the followers of the God of Earth, Ceres, who opposed cremation, and infected people who still lived, along with their families and their entire town or village.

Nevertheless, the green rot was declared eliminated, remaining only in legends told to frighten little children. Any specialized medicine for the illness had long since run out.

If only I had a potion made of dragon bone marrow, which can cure anything... Well, thinking about that won't get me anywhere.

Wallowing in regret wouldn't bring the dead back to life, nor would it keep Diné from joining their ranks.

She did have one hope in regard to the green rot, or perhaps *doubt* was more appropriate.

Why did the lich that appeared in Krio Village make skeletons instead of zombies?

Zombies could spread the green rot. They would be a far more terrifying weapon if you were trying to destroy humanity. Yet, the soldiers had seen skeletons in the village. That meant the lich had intentionally burned away the infected flesh to use the harmless bones that remained.

Maybe it figured its efforts would go to waste if the children it captured for sacrifice got sick and died... Regardless, it's possible the lich stopped the green rot from spreading.

It was something humans like Diné would be grateful for, which is exactly why she couldn't understand why a lich would do it.

Undead creatures are supposed to act out of their hatred for living things...

The undead despised humans for possessing the life they lacked. That, or their hatred of humans had driven them to become undead. Either way, every example she'd seen in literature showed that liches were the archenemy of humanity because they loved to terrorize and massacre people.

She had heard of some magic users who became liches to throw off the

shackles of their life span in order to advance their magic, so not every lich was motivated by hatred, but they would hide themselves deep in mountain caves or the like where no one could interfere with their research.

The only good lich is a lich that doesn't show their face in front of people.

If that train of thought was correct, then the lich in Krio Village was evil.

But there's something bothering me.

There was still one thing that didn't sit right with her, but she left the castle and returned to her manor.

Once she'd completed her preparations, she mounted her horse and departed for Krio Village alone, so as not to risk her troops getting the green rot.



The day after they defeated the goblins and wererat, Mira woke up earlier than the other children so she could prepare breakfast. As she pulled a bucket of water from the well, something felt strange.

Huh, was it always this light?

Pulling the heavy bucket from the depths of the well was normally quite the task for her small frame. Today, however, she was able to do it quickly. Then she poured the water into a tub that she carried back to the village chief's house, and that, too, seemed effortless.

Did I get stronger?

It was weird to think she'd gotten stronger in that short a time, but that was the only explanation she could think of.

It's all thanks to Teacher.

Terios had given the children plenty of meat and fruit, which they had rarely eaten before, and her body had pretty much returned to normal after becoming gaunt from the green rot. That must explain her newfound strength. As she pinched the muscles of her arms, she heard Terios's voice from behind.

"Good morning, Mira. I see you're up early again today."

“Good morning, Teacher. I’m about to make breakfast.” She smiled and went to the kitchen, pouring the water she brought into a pot to start boiling some sausage and taro.

“Sometimes it crosses my mind that if I weren’t a skeleton, I’d be able to taste your home cooking. It’s quite unfortunate that I can’t.”

“Uh... Thank you,” Mira replied, uncertain how to respond to the compliment, her cheeks turning red as she prepared enough dishes for nine people and one cat.

They had a breakfast of bread that Torio had baked the day before, along with the boiled sausage and taro. Once arithmetic class was over, Mira went to the clearing outside the village for what had become her daily magic training.

There, the vague sense that something was different turned into certainty.

“Fireball!”

She waved the mithril staff at the same stump as always and chanted the same incantation as always. Yet, for some reason, the ball of fire that appeared was twice the size it had been the day before. It didn’t just leave a burn mark on the stump—it blasted off a whole layer of the surface.

“...Huh?”

Despite having just cast the spell, she stood frozen in her spot, dumbfounded that her magic had clearly grown deadlier.

While she stood there, the black cat suddenly leaped onto her head.

“My, my, seems you’ve gotten a nice power-up.”

“Ah, but why?!”

Her confusion outweighed her joy at becoming stronger, leaving her shaken.

The black cat tapped Mira’s cheek a couple of times with her tail and said, “Calm down. You beat two goblins, so you got that much stronger.”

“Huh?”

“You beat those goblins yesterday, right? So, in other words, you’re stronger than two goblins. In fact, you had to become stronger than the goblins.

Therefore, you've attained power stronger than two goblins."

"Wh-what?!"

Mira's mind was spinning from the convincing but senseless logic.

The cat let out a frustrated sigh and continued to explain.

"If a normal hunter defeats a bear, they don't get strong, right?"

"Right."

"But by the logic I just laid out, if you defeated the bear with magic, you would get stronger."

"That's the part I don't understand..."

Why was this strange phenomenon limited to magic users?

The cat jumped to the ground from the confused girl's head.

"This world is actually created from all the perceptions of the creatures within it. It's just a vague, undefined thing, really. So if you connect to the arche, the heart of the world, and manipulate those perceptions..."

The black cat waved her tail like a wand, and Mira found herself standing over a massive puddle of water that stretched as far as she could see in all directions. She was standing above the ocean.

"Ah... Wh-wh-wh-what is this?!"

"...You can change the world like so. That's what magic is," said the cat.

Having been raised in the mountains, Mira had never seen the ocean before. The single blue surface moved her, but it also caused her to start panicking. Just as she did, the scenery turned back to the clearing where they were a moment before.

"By the by, I only changed your coordinates in space. I didn't turn this backwater village into an ocean. That'd just be a hassle." The cat said this like she could really do that if she wanted.

"Hah..." Mira just nodded back, fatigued by the shock.

"Right, so a magic user is a person who uses the power their soul produces—

mana—to connect to the arche. That means you are connected to the heart of the world,” explained the cat.

“I’m connected to the world...” Confused, Mira looked herself over, but she couldn’t sense it.

“Your mana is as weak as you are now; your connection’s so thin, you can’t feel it. But you are connected, no doubt about it. That’s why your victory over the goblins was deeply engraved into the arche.”

Then the world perceived that Mira was stronger than the goblins.

“Therefore, the world altered you so you would be stronger than two goblins.”

“I guess I get it, but it’s kind of scary...” Mira’s face turned pale. Knowing that she could be altered so easily without her consent left her feeling troubled.

The cat gazed at her with a cruel smile. “Becoming a powerful magic user doesn’t mean increasing your mana; it means strengthening your connection to the world. Which means you’re more affected by the world at the same time.”

“When you gaze into the arche, the arche also gazes into you,” the cat muttered the words of a certain magic user to herself.

“While normal humans and animals have souls, they can’t make mana. The bony old coot taught you that, right? That doesn’t mean normal people are inferior. Quite the opposite, in fact,” continued the cat.

“The opposite?”

“Normal people can shield themselves from the world, since they can’t make mana and aren’t connected to the arche. Though they can use spells, monsters and magic users are actually inferior because they’re greatly susceptible to being altered by the world.”

“.....”

Mira was speechless, the small amount of pride she’d felt at being able to use magic cut off at the roots.

“If you want to stay *you*, don’t ever forget who you are,” added the cat.

“O-okay.” She nodded obediently at the cat’s advice, which also felt like a threat.

And then she had to voice the question that had welled up inside her again.

“Ms. Cat, who are you?”

“Can’t you see? I’m a beautiful cat.”

“Well, I know that, but...” The cat certainly had personality issues if she was so quick to call herself beautiful, but that wasn’t what Mira was after. “You know so much, and the magic you used just now was amazing. You’re not normal, right?”

Of course, she had known the cat was abnormal from the moment she’d spoken human language, but she also possessed unusual knowledge and power, even when compared to Terios.

But the cat just smiled in response to Mira’s question, stroking her own fur.

“Secrets are a girl’s best friend. Stop trying to tear them away so inelegantly.”

“So cool!” Smitten by such a fitting line from a beautiful, bewitching creature, Mira dropped her question in spite of herself.

I don’t think she’d tell me even if I kept bugging her about it.

Ever since she had met the cat, she’d seen her making fun of Terios or playing with the children, but she hadn’t once heard her talk about herself. Maybe the cat had an unpleasant past.

And so she abandoned her in-depth investigation, but she did pose one last request.

“Fine, tell me your name, at least.”

“My name?”

“I can’t go around calling my friend Ms. Cat. It sounds too formal,” said Mira, her cheeks turning red, even though she thought it was strange the cat would be confused by such a simple question.

The cat opened her eyes wide in amazement for a moment. Then her mouth curled up into a crescent-shaped smile.

“Wow, you called me a friend,” she said.

“Ah?!” Mira froze, taken aback by the cat’s smile, which looked both as wicked as that of a starving animal and as innocent as that of a child who’d just found their toy.

As the cat watched Mira, her normal teasing expression returned, and she nodded happily. “All right. As a symbol of our friendship, I’ll let you name me.”

“What, you don’t have a name already?”

“Nope,” said the cat plainly, shocking Mira yet again.

Thinking back, she realized she’d never once heard Terios call the cat by a name, even though he was likely her owner. She wasn’t sure who was to blame, but it seemed they deliberately didn’t bother to name her.

In any case, Mira started suggesting what came to mind.

“Thinking of girls’ names, what about Daphne or Electra?”

“It can’t be something as ordinary as those. I need something suited to me, overflowing with grace and intelligence.”

“All right, what if we take a name from a goddess and go with Juno?”

“I am not a cold, jealous witch like her. I’ll kill you if you choose that.”

“S-sorry.” Mira bowed low to the utterly disgusted cat. “Well, if that’s no good, then, uh...”

She had only just begun studying and didn’t know much, so she couldn’t come up with any fancy names. After thinking so hard her head started to hurt, Mira got frustrated and blurted out a straightforward idea.

“How about Melan, then? It means *black*.”

She waited anxiously for the response; certain the cat would find it too simple. After a few moments of thinking, the cat nodded.

“It’s not exciting, but it hits the mark. I guess it’ll work,” said the cat.

“Oh good,” Mira said, relieved to have finally succeeded.

The black cat, now Melan, looked up at Mira with her typically cruel smile.

“Sorry to throw this at you right when you’re feeling relieved, but something bad’s about to happen.”

“What?” she gasped in surprise. Melan had already disappeared like smoke before she could ask what was going to happen. “Huh? Melan?”

She searched the area, calling out the name she’d just given the cat, but saw no signs of her. However, she gave up quickly because Melan was always moody and appearing or disappearing at random.

“Guess I’ll practice magic some more.”

Deciding to move on, she turned back to the stump for another round of practice. That’s when it happened.

“Stay quiet.” A woman’s voice she didn’t recognize whispered in her ear, and someone simultaneously gripped her from behind, a hand clamped over her mouth.

“Ngh?!”

“Don’t worry—I’m your friend.”

Mira struggled and tried to escape, but the woman just whispered gently in her ear and held her tight.

She’s not a bad person, is she?

She understood now that she had experience fighting goblins. If her opponent were hostile toward her, Mira would have been killed the moment the woman drew up behind her, before she even knew the woman was there. At that realization, she stopped squirming and calmed herself. Relieved, the woman released Mira.

“Sorry I scared you. It’d just be a pain if you screamed and the enemy found me.”

“Uh-huh,” said Mira vaguely as she turned around and inspected the woman.

The woman was young, perhaps in her early twenties. For some reason, she had a cloth covering her nose and mouth, but Mira could still tell from her eyes and the shape of her face alone that she was beautiful. Her red, flame-like hair caught Mira’s attention in particular.

Despite the warmth of the early-summer sun, the woman was covered completely, exposing barely any skin. She wore light armor on her chest, arms, and legs, and a sword with an oddly powerful presence hung from her hip.

“Who are—?”

“I am the holy knight Diné Staktos, captain of the Second Knight Squadron of the Erythron Royal Military.”

“The holy knight?!”

Even village girls had heard stories of the demigod and protector of the kingdom.

Diné held a finger to Mira’s lips as she yelped in surprise, urging her to be quiet.

“I felt mana, so I came to investigate. Are you a magic user?” Diné inquired suspiciously as she looked at the burnt stump and then at the mithril staff Mira held.

“Y-yes.” Though confused, Mira nodded back.

“I see. So is the lich gathering child magic users? What in the world...?”

“Ummm—”

“No, I need to prioritize securing the captives over investigating. Do you know how many children the lich has captured and where they are right now?”

“What?” She was lost and confused by the barrage of questions. Not only did she not know what this lich thing was, but she also hadn’t heard anything about captured children.

Sensing that there was some misunderstanding, she tried to go over each question one by one, but something happened.

“I’ve been found, huh?” said Diné, her expression suddenly grim. She stood in front of Mira as if to cover her and drew the sword from her hip.

From a distortion in the air where the woman stared, a black-robed skeleton stepped out—Terios.

“Do we—?”

He started to ask if they had a visitor, but before he had the opportunity, Diné came slashing at him.

“Hiya!”

She closed the distance of almost ten steps in only one and swung with a downward strike in an attempt to shatter Terios’s cranium. The movement was so fast that, in Mira’s eyes, she seemed to have disappeared.

But the blue embers of Terios’s eyes kept up with the speed. He slid his back foot and leaned his body just enough to evade the godly fast strike.

“Such ski—”

“Hah!”

Terios tried to compliment the swordswoman, but she immediately followed up with a horizontal slash at his jaw. He saw that attack coming, too, and leaped far backward to evade the blindingly fast slash.

“First, le—”

Terios tried to speak again, but Diné rushed in to strike once more, refusing to let him finish a sentence. This wasn’t because the holy knight was a slash-first, ask-questions-later kind of person who refused to listen to what someone had to say, by the way. When a swordsman faced a magic user, the proper strategy was to attack when their opponent’s guard was down, to move in close and keep up the pressure without pause. They needed to beat down the magic user before they could recite an incantation.

If she failed to do that, her opponent could perform a dangerous spell. They could move far away or bind her feet, then fire long-range attacks from beyond her sword’s reach to kill her.

Considering all of that, Diné absolutely could not allow a lich skilled enough to evade her first strike even a moment to speak.

However, Terios was just trying to persuade his opponent to avoid a pointless battle, but the swordswoman was so skilled, he didn’t have time to hold a real conversation.

The result was that Terios continued to evade without fighting back, and Diné

continued to persistently attack. Watching this all unfold, Mira realized she'd raised her staff and shouted something.

"Fireball!"

She shot an orb of fire at the holy knight attacking the person to whom she owed her life, but it did nothing more than burn the ground without so much as grazing her. Their battle was simply too swift.

However, the sudden spell flying in from the side surprised Diné, which was enough to make her jump back from Terios.

"What are you—?!"

"Please don't attack my teacher!"

Incensed, Mira shouted as loudly as she could at Diné, whose eyes were wide with shock. Though she knew that she didn't stand a chance against Diné, she pointed her staff at her again. That's when Terios moved to her side in the blink of an eye and stopped her with his hand.

"Mira, when you point a weapon at another person, you must be prepared to take their life or have your life taken. But I don't want you to have to be ready for that sort of thing."

"But, Teacher..."

What must Mira have looked like, practically throwing a tantrum because she couldn't bear to see the person who saved her life being threatened?

Though her sword still pointed at Terios, Diné showed her first signs of being willing to talk.

"You bastard, have you brainwashed that child?"

"If you consider teaching her how to read, write, and do arithmetic brainwashing, then, yes, I suppose I have," he replied sarcastically, looking at Mira.

Picking up on his intentions, she yelled, "Teacher is the one who saved our lives. He'd never do anything bad!"

"It actually pains my heart that you would trust me that much."

Terios bashfully scratched his cheekbone in the face of Mira's strong feelings.

Now it was Diné's turn to look confused.

"A monster saved the lives of humans? I don't buy it."

"But if he hadn't saved us, the green rot would have killed us!" shouted Mira, and Diné's eyes opened wide in shock.

"You can't possibly be a Krio Village survivor?!"

"Yeah, I am," said Mira, not seeing how she could be anything else.

With a pained expression, Diné asked, "Your parents?"

"I don't have a dad. Momma went to the city to get help, and..." Mira couldn't help but burst into tears as an old emotional wound began to bleed again.

"I see. I'm sorry." Diné gave a simple apology, then directed her attention to Terios and resumed questioning him. "Did you really save this girl from the green rot?"

"I did. I had a healing potion prepared for it. I'm going to use the Apport spell to bring what I used here to show you, so please don't attack me again," warned Terios before he recited the incantation. He pulled a small bottle with the same potion that he'd used to save Mira and the other children out of thin air and tossed it to Diné.

She caught the bottle with her left hand while keeping her right on her sword and held the bottle up so she could examine the liquid inside without taking her eyes off Terios.

"I'm no potions master, and I have no idea if this would work on the green rot, but I can tell that it's valuable," she said.

"And?"

"And there's still no way I trust you." Diné tossed the small bottle back and slowly lowered the point of her sword, which had never left Terios before now. "I've never heard of a lich who saves sick children."

"I can't say I have, either," responded Terios. His words were neither meant to attack himself nor make himself appear better; he simply stated a fact. Diné

stared at him, sizing him up.

“If you have a reason for coming to this place and saving that child, then I’ll hear it,” she said, sheathing her sword, though the wary tension never left her body.

Terios didn’t act as if that bothered him, though, and he turned his back defenselessly.

“I’d rather not talk while standing. Shall we go over there and speak?”

“Fine with me,” replied Diné, willingly following him as he walked toward the village.

After spending a moment just to calm herself down, Mira ran after them.



While the children focused on their game of ball, the bone golems weeded the fields and chopped wood.

That had become the daily norm for Krio Village, but it wasn’t the norm for the world at large, which is why Diné looked so shocked as Terios led her to the village chief’s house.

“Please have a seat,” he said.

“No thank you.”

Diné refused the chair that Terios offered her once they got into the living room, instead choosing to stand in front of the table. Unlike a magic user, who could just recite an incantation, a sword user’s first motions to attack would be slowed if they took a seat.

In other words, Diné was making it very clear that she was still being cautious. Terios smiled sadly at that and sat down himself.

“Mira, please bring our guest some water.”

“O-okay.” Following his orders, she rushed to bring a jug of water.

I do wish I had some tea around, thought Terios.

He had planned to open discussions with the Erythron Kingdom at some point, but *he* had intended to approach *them*. He never expected they would

reach out to him so quickly, and through a single, incredibly powerful swordswoman at that.

While he reflected on the naivety of his predictions, Mira offered a wooden cup of water to Diné.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks.” Diné accepted the cup and first took a tiny sip. She rolled the water around on her tongue to check the taste, then drank the rest of it.

Checking for poison? Well, I suppose that’s to be expected.

She should actually have refused to eat or drink anything given to her while she was in enemy territory, but perhaps she was trying to be kind to Mira, who’d brought her the water.

The woman was kind to children, brave enough to come here alone, yet flexible enough to listen to what an undead had to say. And she was clearly tremendously skilled with the sword, so much so that Terios couldn’t even get a word in. All of that made her an excellent asset, both physically and mentally.

I want her on my side.

The cravings of a human-resource collector welled up inside him, something that hadn’t changed about him from when he was alive. But he pushed that down for now and cheerfully opened the conversation.

“First, allow me to introduce myself. My name is Terios. I do apologize for our meager hospitality. We’re just a skeleton crew here.”

“I see. You’re eloquent but terrible at making jokes,” Diné responded, looking at Terios with eyes that asked what he was on about. Then she introduced herself. “I am Diné Staktos, captain of the Second Knight Squadron of the Erythron Royal Military and descendant of the God of Fire, Vulcanus.”

“A lauded name that I have heard.” He accepted the introduction and nodded, having surmised from her appearance and the sword at her hip that she was the famed holy knight. “Am I correct in assuming you came to this village to defeat me?”

“I heard that a lich leading an army of skeletons had appeared in the village

destroyed by the green rot. It seems my information was wrong, though,” she replied, nodding toward Mira, who stood by Terios.

“Mira, you must be tired of standing there. Take a seat,” said Terios, kindly offering Mira a chair.

“Okay, thank you.” Mira went out of her way to move a chair so she could sit so close to Terios that she practically pressed against his arm.

The sight only made the bewildered expression on Diné’s face grow stronger.

“I’ve heard that undead beings feel nothing but hatred toward the living...,” she said.

“That is true of the ones that occur naturally,” offered Terios.

“Really?” asked Mira curiously. Deciding it was an excellent opportunity to teach her, Terios launched into a detailed explanation.

“Typically, a person’s extreme emotions at the moment of death, such as rage or hatred toward the person who killed them, or regret and a desire not to succumb, produce an undead because their soul stays in this world instead of moving on to the afterlife. Then they start moving again, becoming skeletons, zombies, or something else.”

“I see,” said Mira.

“However, in most cases, the power of the soul runs out, and the undead creature loses all their sense of self, which turns them into a corpse that does nothing but attack the living. Though rare, some undead beings retain their sense of self in death.”

These kinds of beings combined the physical durability of the undead with the intellect of a human. By felling humans and monsters, they trained their magic until they became something like a lich or a vampire. They then used their newfound power to wreak their revenge.

“I have heard that the famed Undead Kings Dakruon and Katharon were like that. Dakruon became undead from the sadness he felt when the person he loved was stolen from him. For Katharon, it was the anger of a loved one’s betrayal that transformed him. Their hatred fueled their power and eventually

led to them destroying entire countries.”

“And what of you?” Diné asked sharply, out of the blue. Terios couldn’t help stumbling for words in response.

“Uh, how should I put it...? My circumstance is special. I did not become this way naturally.”

“In other words, you made yourself undead?”

“Something like that,” said Terios vaguely.

She was insinuating that he was a magic user who used black magic to turn himself into a lich, but unfortunately, that was not quite correct, either. In reality, he had chosen to become undead of his own accord, but someone else had actually made him undead.

Diné sighed heavily at Terios. “So you’re a lich who, instead of feeling nothing but hate like normal, retained your sanity and saved the lives of children? It’s a hard story to swallow at first, but when you show me this kind of evidence...”

She looked at Mira, who was clinging to Terios’s arm, then out the window. The children were curiously peeking in, trying to catch a glimpse of a rare visitor.

“Ah, she saw us!”

“Who’s that pretty lady?”

“Heh-heh-heh, probably a potential lover for the bony old coot.”

“What?! It’s not just Mira he’s after? He wants that beautiful lady, too? I knew that skeleton was a pervert!”

While the children quickly fled, a certain black cat had tossed in a lie, and a certain lovestruck boy had heard it, took it as truth, and shouted angrily.

“Those children...”

“Teacher, I’ll make sure to scold them later.”

“Please do.”

Terios dropped his head in his hands, but Mira tried to cheer him up, and he pulled himself together.

Though if I let Mira cover for me, Torio will just get even angrier.

Mira and Torio weren't two Undead Kings like Dakruon and Katharon, but thinking about how deep love itself led to strife, Terios found himself speechless.

Seeing Terios so pathetic made Diné smile for the first time since she arrived.

"Ha-ha, looks like even a lich who's retained their sanity is no match for children," she remarked as she pulled out a chair and sat across from Terios. "Now then, I've told you my goal for coming here. Next I want you to tell me yours."

Even her previously rude tone had softened.

Glad that she was trusting him a little more, Terios spoke grandly of his ambitions.

"My goal is to create a peaceful world that will last a millennium, a place where no one will die or be killed unjustly."

"...Uh-huh." His response was out of this world. Diné was silent for a moment, then glared directly at him. "I didn't expect something greedy like wanting territory or fame, but to hear that an undead seeks a peaceful world... You really are terrible at jokes."

"Ah, but I'm not joking." Keeping eye contact with her the whole time, he continued to explain to show he was serious. "You just said 'undead' like it was a negative thing, but in fact, it's the opposite. No one but an undead being can create a long-lasting peace."

"Why is that?"

"Because a living human can't," replied Terios without hesitation. "Humanity was born, civilization was achieved, and over two thousand years have passed since. But there has never once been peace on the continent of Trokhia."

Hunger assailed them, disease challenged them, and they even killed one another in war—humanity had continuously shed blood and tears.

"And why do you think that is? The answer is that it's just in their nature."

There were kind people who would lend a hand to others with no expectation

of receiving something in return. There were devoted people who would sacrifice themselves for their loved ones. There were even courageous people who would risk their lives in battle to save those they'd never met.

However, those were, at best, a small minority of exceptions. Most people were selfish and would be willing to kick someone else down if it meant living longer.

“Well, this isn't true of only humans. The primary goal of all living beings is to keep themselves and their descendants alive. For that purpose, they must eat, which is the act of taking the life of another living being and consuming it, turning it into energy for continuing on. You could say that every living creature uses that efficient method of survival.”

No animal was an exception to this rule, nor were plants. They stretched their roots into the ground to leech nutrients and spread their leaves out to steal the light of the sun from one another. It might be difficult for humans to recognize it, but plants slew their kin over the resources they needed to live.

“All living things, including humans, are incapable of peace from the moment they are born. If it was the gods who created life, they're the ones with a truly bad sense of humor.”

“.....”

While his statement insulted the god she was descended from, Diné only grimaced instead of countering. She had spent her life killing monsters and enemy humans to protect her country, so she could connect to something in his words.

“As long as humans live naturally, a peaceful world will never materialize. That's why I must use these hands to make it,” he said resolutely, clenching his white, fleshless hands of bone.

If fighting was natural, then a world without combat was as unnatural as possible. But creating things that could never be born naturally was a hallmark of the human race.

“In reality, humans have made a variety of things in their attempt to create peace. They've come together and formed countries to protect themselves

from outsiders, and they've put laws in place to eliminate internal conflict," he added.

"And they still can't make peace despite that?" asked Diné.

"No, they can't. History has proven that," countered Terios, quickly throwing aside her question. "Even if the country or laws are correct, the people governing will make mistakes out of greed."

No matter how beautiful a glass is, there's no point if the wine inside is sour.

"People want to eat delicious food and lie with attractive partners, which both require money and power. I have seen those desires sweep up hundreds of rulers and nobles and rot them from the inside."

"It's painful to consider," said Diné. While she might have been the holy knight tasked primarily with fighting outside threats, she wasn't unfamiliar with corruption inside the kingdom. She could only grimace.

"However, that is not a concern with an undead being like myself. There's nothing left on me to rot," Terios said with a smile as he tapped his bone arm. But no one laughed at the joke.

"Uh..."

"I think he's trying to say that because he's undead, he doesn't have human desires and therefore can't be corrupted. He doesn't need food, and it doesn't look like he'd need a woman." Glancing toward his pelvis, Diné carefully explained this to Mira, who didn't seem to get it.

She saw the glance and muttered accidentally in understanding, "Oh, 'cause he doesn't have a penis."

"Ha-ha!"

Diné and Terios both burst into laughter at a mature word suddenly coming out of her cute mouth.

"Ah... S-sorry!"

"No, you're right on the mark, actually. Don't feel bad."

Her face turned bright red as she apologized, having realized a moment too

late what she'd said, but Terios hid his amusement and comforted her.

Diné looked away, seemingly uncomfortable. Terios cleared his throat and continued.

"Ahem... Anyway, because I am undead, I don't have human desires. That's why I won't become corrupt like human rulers. And, more importantly, I won't die of old age, unlike a human king."

No matter how wonderful a king was, he would eventually grow old and die. There was no guarantee that the child of a good king would become a good ruler themselves. Unfortunately, history had proven that as well.

"Let's say a human ruler does manage to create a peaceful world. Everything will be wonderful while they're alive, and perhaps it will be fine during the next ruler's reign. But what about the next? The one after that? At some point, there will be a bad monarch, and everything that was built will come falling down," said Terios.

"True," acknowledged Diné with a grimace, comparing the previous, deceased king with the current young king.

"Humans will die at some point. That's why they can't maintain the peace they worked so hard to build for very long. But that's no problem for me." He tapped his empty, heartless chest, as if implying that's exactly why he had become undead.

Diné nodded slowly in response. "I see. I fully understand your goal now. I feel no need to doubt you just because you're undead."

"So then—"

"But do you really think you can accomplish such a ridiculous dream?" she questioned sharply, cutting off Terios. "A peaceful world with no unjust deaths sounds wonderful, but how are you actually going to make that a reality? A dream that won't come true is no more useful than a painting of bread."

"You're not wrong. Anyone can talk about their ideals, and the world is still filled with strife because no one has been able to accomplish them," said Terios, quickly admitting that his goal was at the height of difficulty. "However, I am not going into this without any plans."

“Well, let’s hear your plans, then.”

Now in his element, Terios excitedly detailed his plans to the deeply engaged swordswoman.

“First, I will lighten the labor load. As you saw on your way here, I will use bone golems and other similar resources to reduce the labor burden on humans. That way, they’ll gain more free time, and I can increase food production to the point that no one will go hungry, even without working.”

“‘A starving mouse will kill even a cat.’ Stable food is indeed important.”

When people’s lives were endangered, they tended to abandon their morals and kill others. Terios had explained this to Mira and the children. That’s why expanding food production was the first step toward peace.

“But even though you may be reasonably powerful, there’s surely a limit to the number of bone golems you can produce,” said Diné.

“Correct. That is why I will gather and train talented people like Mira to help me.”

“I-I’ll try my best!” responded Mira energetically, albeit somewhat surprised to suddenly come up in the conversation.

Diné smiled kindly to her before her face clouded in thought.

“Train magic users, increase the number of bone golems, and have the golems handle the labor... In other words, you’re going to make a world ruled by magic users?”

“I suppose that’s what it would result in,” he replied frankly.

In his ideal world, magic users wouldn’t just be creating a labor source, they’d also be healing injuries, illnesses, and defeating monsters or criminals to protect the peace. They would have a lot on their plates.

What’s more, there needed to be an appropriate reward for their involvement. In exchange for taking on more labor and responsibility than normal people, magic users would have to be well compensated with food, housing, or other forms of payment.

“Is there a problem with that, though? It’s simply replacing the current

monarchs and nobility with magic users. Allowing people with real power to stand at the top, rather than risking someone becoming an incompetent ruler just because they were born to nobility, seems fairer and more effective.”

“...Perhaps,” agreed Diné vaguely, her expression a mix of many emotions.

Though she didn’t want to acknowledge an argument that negated the young king’s existence, she couldn’t argue with Terios because she knew a number of incompetent nobles who had nothing more than their title going for them.

“Would the people accept a world governed by the undead and magic users?” she asked.

“They will, as long as we can provide them a peaceful, comfortable life.” Terios quickly countered Diné’s implication. “The people don’t care who’s leading them as long as their families are safe, they aren’t starving, and they live in peace. They wouldn’t even care if it were a skeleton like me.”

“.....”

Mira was silent, her expression dark. While they’d done it because it was their only path to survival, the children had easily accepted Terios, an undead. Perhaps she thought they were the sort of selfish people who didn’t care who ruled them.

Terios clarified his explanation, though he wasn’t necessarily trying to cover for Mira.

“Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t think it’s a bad thing to want you, your friends, and your family to live happily and to not stick your neck out more than you have to. Living that way is far more peaceful than revolting against the government and killing people under the auspices of justice.”

“That’s the self-indulgent logic of a ruler,” replied Diné, though her tone wasn’t critical. As the holy knight who protected the kingdom, she was on the side of the rulers. She was well aware of the dangers of plotting a revolt.

“I do have a number of other plans in mind, but that is the broad overview,” said Terios, holding his bony palm out to Diné, as if asking whether she had any questions.

After a moment of consideration, she responded, “I don’t think it’ll be that simple.”

“I agree,” Terios conceded. Everything so far was nothing more than empty theory. All kinds of problems would likely come up when he actually put his designs into motion. “That’s why I’ll keep at it until I see it through, whether it takes a hundred years or a thousand.”

If he hadn’t been prepared for that, he wouldn’t have become undead to pursue peace in the first place.

He looked at her with determination, and she finally nodded and gave in.

“All right. I don’t think you can do it, but it would be unfair to keep poking holes without providing any solutions. It’s not as bad as I was expecting anyway.”

“What were you expecting?”

“When you said that humans couldn’t make a peaceful world, I was certain you’d say that you intended to make everyone undead.”

“Ah?!” Mira cried in shock when she heard Diné’s scary supposition.

Beside her, Terios nodded slowly and admitted, “To be honest, I had considered it.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Please relax, Mira. I only mean that I briefly considered it at one point. I don’t have any intention of doing that. If I did, you would all be skeletons by now.”

“Right, good.”

Mira relaxed, while Diné looked at her, her eyes saying it was also a problem to be so easily swayed.

Terios explained his reason in detail, partly to reassure Mira.

“It is true that turning all of humanity into undead would release them from inconveniences like hunger and sexual desire, which would result in less fighting compared to now. The problem is that undead creatures can’t have children.”

Their numbers would dwindle, but they'd never increase, so the world was bound to collapse at some point. Terios wasn't trying to make a peaceful world just for that to happen.

"And besides, that would be a peaceful world for the undead; what I want is a peaceful world for humans."

It was only for humans that he wanted a world without strife. He'd already told Mira that he would destroy any monster or disease in order to make it.

"If you asked me why, I'd say I've just taken a liking to them. And while I may be undead, I have no intention of making others like me."

"Teacher..." Though Mira's gaze of admiration made him feel comfortable, Terios kept his eyes on Diné, who remained suspiciously silent.

"Now then, do you have any other questions?" asked Terios.

"Yes, one." Diné nodded deeply. After a moment, an air of intimidation radiated from the woman. "How exactly are you going to get everyone to accept your dream?"

"Ah?!"

"Oh my, how troubling."

Terios smiled casually, patting Mira's shoulder to calm her down while she clung to him in fear.

In response, Diné gritted her teeth and barked, "Don't brush this off. No matter how wonderful this peaceful world is that you speak of, there will be people opposed to it."

"You're right. There will be especially vehement opposition from the royalty and nobles, the current rulers."

In the world of Terios's dreams, he did need people in charge to maintain peace and manage the territory, but he had no intention of making them a special class like the royals and nobles, who stole money in the form of taxes to lead extravagant lives.

"As long as I am able, I intend to fill leadership positions with capable people, be they commoners or nobles. That will make the kind of people who only

respect bloodlines very unhappy,” he responded.

“What will you do about people who stand against you because of their dissatisfaction?” She stood from her chair and pointed her finger at him, almost like she was pointing her sword.

His teeth clicked as he smiled and replied, “Obviously, I’ll use force to make them listen.”

“...Huh?”

She didn’t expect such a violent-sounding response from the person who’d declared they’d never kill another human and that they wanted to build a peaceful world.

Mira sat there dumbfounded, but Diné smiled, appreciating that he didn’t make excuses or beat around the bush.

“Of course, there’s no option but to use force. That’s actually more reassuring than if you’d said something like ‘Oh, they’d listen if we just talked it out.’ That’s such a green idea that I’d expect flowers to grow out of your head.”

“Unfortunately, my head isn’t filled with compost.” Terios smiled, poking his empty skull.

She didn’t laugh at the joke. Instead, her expression turned severe. “You’ll use force to eliminate those who oppose you and force your will on others. I wouldn’t have any complaints if you only did that with a tiny village, but you’ve said from the beginning that you want to make a peaceful *world*.”

“Yes, I want to bring peace to this world—or at the very least, to the continent of Trokhia.”

“I’m sure you understand what that means, right?”

“Of course.” He still smiled in response to her threatening question.

Then he clearly stated his intentions, as if to clear things up for Mira, who sat beside him holding her breath.

“To eliminate fighting, I’ll bring together all the nations on the continent of Trokhia and forge one unified country.”

“One unified country...” Having grown up knowing nothing outside the small Krio Village, Mira couldn’t fathom how massive that was.

Even Diné, the holy knight, knew only so much about the Erythron Kingdom and its neighboring countries.

But Terios had seen everything on the continent from one end to the other. He understood this expanse of the world better than anyone. Even with all that knowledge, he still asserted that creating a unified country was the only way to bring forth a world of peace.

“War is what happens between countries. Thus, if only one nation exists in the entire world, there’s no way such a conflict could happen. It’s simple,” he stated. The logic wasn’t complex, but seeing it through would be more difficult than anything else.

“You’re trying to do what Massacre King Aeon couldn’t?” asked Diné.

“I am.”

“Then that makes you my enemy.” She drew her sword from its sheath the moment Terios answered in the affirmative. “A peaceful world would be wonderful. But if that means harming His Majesty, King Calyx, or destroying the Erythron Kingdom, then I have no choice but to defeat you!”

“I suppose it had to come to this.” He sighed in disappointment as Diné glared at him with bitter hostility.

It didn’t matter to her if Terios’s path would ultimately save many lives. No, that wasn’t it. In truth, her heart ached because she wasn’t able to protect the people of Krio Village. She likely agreed with him on some level about the peaceful world he sought because she had listened for so long.

Even so, she was the holy knight of the Erythron Kingdom, and more importantly, she couldn’t abandon its young monarch, her king.

“All right, let’s finish what we started earlier,” she said.

“T-Teacher...” Frightened, Mira looked up at Terios with concern as Diné nodded toward the exit to tell him to go outside.

He gently patted Mira’s head and calmly said, “It isn’t yet certain that we are

enemies.”

“What?”

“If King Calyx, the king of the Erythron Kingdom, agrees to my plan, then we can become allies, not enemies.”

“.....”

For a moment, Diné stared silently at Terios, who showed no desire to fight and instead offered a peaceful solution. Then she suddenly relaxed her shoulders and returned her sword to its sheath.

“I’ll return to the capital and report everything I’ve seen and heard here to His Majesty. I don’t expect him to believe what I tell him, though.”

“I’d be grateful even if you would just try talking with him,” said Terios with genuine gratitude. In reality, there weren’t many people in the world who would have seriously engaged with him for this long.

Normally, they would either refuse to listen to a monster’s jokes and attack without asking any questions or they would get scared by the difference in strength and start begging for their lives.

Even if they didn’t believe Diné’s report and they ended up as enemies, expressing Terios’s intentions to the administrators of Erythron Kingdom was a step toward the future.

“All right, I’ll be on my way,” said Diné, turning away and heading toward the exit, as there was nothing else to discuss. Just as she opened the door, she turned back, looked at Mira, and bowed. “I apologize for everything.”

“Oh, thank you.” Mira was thrown off-balance by the sudden apology, and Diné closed the door behind her and left.

“Teacher...”

“I had no intentions of hiding my plans from you, but I apologize for not telling you sooner,” said Terios, bowing to an anxious Mira. He then looked out the window and said, “I’d like to explain things to the others as well. Would you mind bringing them here? Although, I do think someone’s already heard it all.”

“Ah?!” Torio cried out in surprise at being discovered. He hadn’t learned his

lesson from the first time and was still standing below the window, listening in.

“Torio...,” said Mira.

“Y-you need the others to come here? I’ll get them!” he exclaimed, scurrying off as Mira stared at him coldly.

Laughing at how quickly Torio rushed away, Terios patted Mira on the shoulder. “Everyone will get bored if they have to just listen to me talk for a long time. Let’s get some lunch together.”

“Okay!”

Mira replied energetically and helped Terios place bread and dishes on the table.



Building a single unified country in order to craft a peaceful world. The children’s reactions to his lofty ambitions were less than ideal.

“Wow, it sounds kinda amazing.”

“Well, do whatever you want.”

At least the ones who applauded the idea without really understanding it were better than the likes of Torio, who chewed some bread disinterestedly.

“Wait, that’s all?” asked Mira hesitantly to Terios, who was disappointed and confused. “You explained everything for us, but we can’t even imagine what it’d be like to unify the whole continent. I don’t even know how things would be different... I’m sorry.”

She bowed her head and apologized for not understanding, but that just made Terios panic.

“Oh, no, no, it’s not your fault. It’s my fault for rushing ahead and telling you all this before I’ve even taught you geography and history.”

“Yep, it’s all the perverted skeleton’s fault,” added the black cat, breaking her silence at an opportunity to blame Terios.

He grimaced, and Torio mercilessly followed up.

“I mean, I don’t know what this whole unified-country thing means, but

what's it got to do with us anyway? Do whatever you want by yourself."

"Torio!" exclaimed Mira, lunging angrily at him for being so rude to the person they owed their lives to.

But before she could say anything else, Terios gripped her shoulder to hold her back.

"No, Torio is right. At the end of the day, this is my own goal. That naturally means all of you have nothing to do with it."

"But..."

Terios was working toward a peaceful world so weak people like them could live happily without dying unjustly. It was wrong for them to accept the benefits while also stepping aside and claiming they have nothing to do with him.

That's what Mira tried to argue, but Terios held up a hand to stop her.

"Mira, what I am doing is forcing my inconvenient good intentions on others. It's definitely not fair," he said.

"Huh...?"

"You've just reminded me of that, Torio. Thank you."

"U-ugh, I think I'm gonna be sick." Torio turned away, uncomfortable at being thanked for something he intended as an insult.

Mira watched the exchange, still confused.

Forcing his inconvenient good intentions on others? Why did he say it in such a bad way?

If Terios was able to achieve the peaceful world he was after, then innocent people, like Mira's mother or the other villagers, wouldn't have to die before their time. That was something wonderful. Why would he say it was unfair?

Completely unable to understand, Mira looked up at Terios's face. He smiled sadly and explained.

"Even if the goal itself is just, I'll have to do unjust things on the road to achieving it. To give a concrete example, I'll probably have to fight Diné just a few days from now."

“Ah, you’re going to fight that lady?!”

“Yes, there’s a ninety-nine percent chance I will,” said Terios calmly in response to the children’s cries of shock. “Diné is a good person who fights for her country and has saved many people. Fighting me is also for the sake of her country, not out of anger or hatred.”

Mira could tell that about her as well. Although it was her first time speaking with a knight and she had no one to compare Diné to, Mira felt that there probably weren’t many who could be so aptly described as *virtuous*.

“And I also don’t hate Diné. Actually, I think she’s an incredible woman. I would love to be on good terms with her.”

“.....”

Mira frowned as she felt an uncomfortable, nauseous sensation in her stomach, like a fire was lit inside her.

Terios didn’t seem to notice, though, and carried on speaking coolly.

“However, I must fight Diné and force her to surrender in order to achieve my ambitions. I’ll keep doing similarly unjust things as I continue.” Though he knew it wasn’t just, he had to keep going. “My insistence will provoke fights, and the people who are dragged into them will curse me and wish I hadn’t done anything. That’s why what I’m doing is nothing more than forcing my inconvenient good intentions on others.”

“Teacher...”

Mira understood what he was saying, but tears filled her eyes anyway because she felt terrible for him. Terios could only continue moving forward, even though people might hate him.

Torio saw that and suddenly shouted, “You perverted skeleton, you made Mira cry!”

“Huh, you’re blaming me?!” yelped Terios.

“Oh, are you going to make a girl cry, then give excuses?” added the black cat as Terios panicked.

The back-and-forth among the three of them completely shattered the

serious atmosphere, and Mira couldn't help but laugh.

"Ha-ha!"

"Look, Mira's already smiling again. See?" said Terios.

"Tsk."

"Boring."

Torio and the cat reluctantly backed down, and Terios breathed a sigh of relief.

He scratched his cheekbone bashfully, then got back to the matter at hand.

"Ummm, anyway, I plan to make one unified country in order to build a peaceful world, but I will do everything I can to make sure it doesn't bother you too much, so please don't worry. And even if I lose to Diné and die—"

Before he could say that he would make preparations so they could continue living safely, one of the boys cut him off with a shout.

"Teacher, you're gonna die?!"

"Well, I'll do my best not to, but nothing is certain in a fight," said Terios.

"Oh..." The boy was saddened at his response. "If you die, then we can't eat meat or the yummy bread from the capital anymore!"

"...What?"

"You're right! If he dies, I won't be able to read new picture books. That's bad!"

"...What?"

Mouth agape, Terios stood frozen as the other children also started shouting selfishly.

Paling as she listened to their replies, Mira yelled, "Lakos, Mūs, what are you saying?!"

"I mean, the bread Torio makes doesn't taste nice."

"You brat, my bread isn't gross!" yelled Torio, angrily grabbing Lakos, the tactless boy.

Mūs, the book-loving girl, didn't stop them. Instead, she let loose with how she really felt.

"Teacher's face is scary, but the picture books he brings are fun. I don't want to lose them."

"Mūs, think about your words!" Mira, being more mature, was aghast at the particular way the younger children didn't hold back.

Unaware of her distress, the others started saying whatever they wanted.

"If Teacher is gone, will Daddy's bones stop moving?"

"Then we'll have to chop all the wood and harvest the crops. That's impossible."

"Yeah, we definitely need him in this village."

"Everyone, wait..." Mira had moved beyond anger and now felt ashamed that the children thought only of themselves instead of offering gratitude to the one who'd saved them.

She was about to get on her knees and apologize to Terios for everything, but...

"Ha-ha-ha! Ah-ha-ha!" He held his empty stomach and let out a roar of laughter.

"T-Teacher?"

"Oh gosh, I don't know when the last time I laughed like that was." He wiped the rims of his eye sockets like he was brushing away tears while Mira continued looking at him with concern.

"You want me to stick around because otherwise, you'll lose your nice food and fun things, which is no fun at all. That's perfectly fine in terms of expectations for me to fulfill." Terios smiled with peculiar happiness and went around patting everyone's heads, as if to say it was all right for them to be so blunt.

As she watched him, Mira intuited something.

He must be carrying very heavy expectations.

Perhaps he'd been asked to do something by a lot of people when he'd been alive. Mira burned with curiosity, but she felt that Terios's smile would disappear if she asked, and so she hid her question deep within her heart.



CHAPTER 4 | The Sword of a God and the Sword of Magic

The holy knight Diné returned to the capital and went directly to the king's meeting room, where she reported everything she'd seen and heard in Krio Village without omission. But all she got in return was Prime Minister Gelan's angry voice.

"Are you saying you were fooled by that monster's lies and came running back with your tail between your legs?!"

"Uncle!" shrieked Calyx as he watched Gelan slap Diné across the face.

However, she responded without so much as flinching. "Your Majesty, please calm down. Prime Minister, I understand your anger, but I would also ask that you calmly listen to what I have to say."

"Hmph, you want me to listen to a coward?" spat Gelan angrily, rubbing the hand he used to slap Diné.

Her high levels of mana were constantly strengthening her body, to the point that even a direct strike from a wooden training sword wouldn't leave a mark on her. If a normal person punched her, they'd obviously only end up with an injured hand.

Somewhat satisfied at seeing Gelan accomplish nothing more than hurting himself, she turned back to her original conversation.

"I get it. A lich appearing in Krio Village, saving the children from the green rot, and aspiring to unify the continent to build a peaceful world is a tale not even a two-bit minstrel would tell." Actually, it wasn't only Gelan. Calyx, too, was staring at her in disbelief. "It's not as if I believe him entirely. However, the truth of his words is irrelevant at this point. The real problem is that he's an Undead King."

"What?!"

"An Undead King? Like in the legends?!"

Gelan let out a cry of shock, and Calyx's face went pale.

"Diné, are you certain?" asked Calyx.

“Yes. The lich who called himself Terios evaded my blade a number of times.”

“Impossible...” Calyx trembled violently with despair.

Diné could take on a thousand knights single-handedly. The only person capable of evading her blade was her late grandfather, the previous holy knight. Which meant that, at the very least, Terios was as powerful as a holy knight.

“His physical defenses are one thing, but the real issue is his magical ability. His mana was well hidden, so I wasn’t able to get an accurate feel for his power, but I did at least see him use Teleport,” she noted.

When she had been talking to Mira outside the village, he’d suddenly appeared with teleportation magic. Not a single magic user in the Erythron Kingdom could use that same spell.

“Overall, he’s clearly more powerful than me,” said Diné.

An undead being more powerful than a holy knight, a descendant of a god. If he wasn’t what you’d call an Undead King, then what would you call him? If an Undead King was powerful enough to destroy a country, then the tiny rural nation of the Erythron Kingdom might as well have been a sandcastle.

“There’s no guarantee we would win, even if I led the army against him,” admitted Diné.

“Hmph, how do we know you’re not just exaggerating in an attempt to conceal your own cowardice?” Gelan eyed her suspiciously, but she continued to address Calyx as if she didn’t care.

“Even if we did win, our military would be torn to shreds. And if that happens, the Xanthon Kingdom will attack and destroy us.”

The Erythron Kingdom bordered only one other territory by land—Xanthon Kingdom, to the south. The southern bogs prevented them from staging large-scale invasions, but they were always scheming to take Erythron Kingdom land.

If the lich wiped out Diné and half the army or worse, Xanthon Kingdom would be more than happy to invade.

“Pardon my rudeness, but it doesn’t matter whether the Undead King’s words are true. The only relevant issue is that our country will be destroyed if we fight

him,” said Diné.

Between the Undead King and the neighboring kingdom, it was only an issue of who would claim the spoils. The Erythron Kingdom was fated to lose either way.

“.....”

The extreme despair had already made Calyx speechless, but Diné continued to her grim conclusion.

“Your Majesty, there is a saying: ‘Don’t burn the forest and wake the sleeping dragon.’ We cannot ignore the threat the Undead King poses, but we should stay our hand for now.”

Diné thought this was a compromise they could agree on. Personally, she hadn’t doubted Terios. She believed he was truly working toward building a peaceful world, and he wouldn’t become their enemy unless they stood in his way.

Even if they set aside everything about his goals, Erythron Kingdom had been doomed from the moment such an insanely powerful monster crossed their borders. There were still parts of his true intentions Diné wasn’t certain about, but she did think that the Erythron Kingdom had no future unless they allied with him to protect themselves from other countries.

Still, getting everyone to accept a monster ally won’t be easy.

Diné had defeated countless monsters as a holy knight, but Terios was the first friendly monster she’d met that was as intelligent as a human. She was vaguely aware of monsters that weren’t hostile toward humans, like dragons and fairies, but that just meant they didn’t actively attack people. If you trespassed into their habitat, you’d be in for a world of hurt.

And that aside, undead creatures were supposed to be the embodiment of hatred. Who would ever believe one was trying to give humans a peaceful world?

There’d be no other way but to have people actually meet him, talk with him, and spend time getting to know him.

That meant the best strategy currently was to avoid inciting hostile relations so they could continue to monitor the situation.

But Gelan outright destroyed what she'd tried to lay out.

"What ridiculous drivel are you spouting? Leaving a dangerous monster to its own devices is exactly the sort of foolishness that would destroy our country!"

"But—"

"No ifs, ands, or buts. There's a chance this Undead King could conspire with Xanthon and attack us. In fact, it surely will!" said Gelan.

"....."

She couldn't counter Gelan's logic.

"As the holy knight, what you should do is defeat the Undead King and protect your country, even if it means sacrificing your life. Am I wrong?"

"....."

"Diné..."

She fell silent, and Calyx looked on in worry.

Turning to the young king, whom she loved like a little brother, she gently asked, "Your Majesty, what are your orders? To defeat the Undead King or ignore the Undead King?"

"I..."

Depending on his decision, not only could Diné die, but his country could also be destroyed. Pressed against the weighty decision, Calyx turned pale and wavered.

Diné did everything she could to hold back her urge to support him, so he could gain the resolution he needed to be king. She hardened her heart and pressed him for a decision.

"What will it be, Your Majesty?"

"I—I..."

"That's enough," interjected Gelan, wrapping his arms around Calyx as he

shook while preparing to speak. “My nephew is still only eleven years old. Don’t force him to bear a burden as heavy as the fate of the country.”

“Uncle...”

Tears welled up in Calyx’s eyes at his own pitifulness, and he buried his face in Gelan’s chest.

There was nothing else Diné could do now that things had turned out this way.

“I will give the order in His Majesty’s stead. Holy Knight Diné, you will rid our kingdom of the foul Undead King.”

“Yes, sir.”

Diné bowed low to hide her pained expression and quickly moved toward the meeting room’s exit.

Calyx shouted to her back, “Diné! You’ll come back, right?”

“...I’ll be taking my leave.”

Intentionally withholding a promise to return, she hurried away from Calyx.

I can only hope that my death will serve to help him grow into a king.

Sad determination formed in her heart, and she slapped her cheeks to chase away her feelings of weakness.

The probability of Diné winning against Terios was low, but it wasn’t zero. She was a warrior descended from Vulcanus, the God of Fire. She couldn’t give up, even in her final moments.

Diné rushed back to her manor to prepare for the showdown.



Five days after the holy knight left Krio Village with her warning, Terios’s Alarm spell alerted him to a visitor while he was in the middle of teaching the children reading and writing in the village chief’s house.

“Ah, it looks like Diné has arrived,” he remarked.

“Ah?!”

“I will go and greet her. Please continue your writing practice, everyone.”

Despite the children’s surprise, Terios spoke lightly and started to cast Teleport. As he did, Mira tightly gripped his robe.

“Teacher, promise you’ll come back alive.”

She was afraid of losing him just like she had lost her mother.

Her head hung in unease, and Terios gently said, “Unfortunately, I cannot promise that.”

“.....”

“The reason being that I am already dead.”

“Huh?”

Shocked, she looked up and saw Terios smiling and pointing at his cranium.

“But if you’re happy enough with this moving skeleton, then I can promise I will return.”

“Okay!” Mira nodded energetically and released his robe.

Terios gave the girl a cheerful look, cast Teleport, and instantly warped from the chief’s house to the road connecting the village to the next town over a short distance away. He stood in an empty field, allowed to lie fallow without any wheat planted to avoid damaging the soil. He cast another spell and pulled out a mithril staff.

With his preparations complete, he waited. Hoofbeats loud enough to make the ground tremble echoed across the field, and Diné and dozens of other knights astride horses came into view.

“I see you’re operating with your troops today,” said Terios, having thought that Diné was the kind of person to shoulder responsibility on her own. This was an unexpected turn of events. Diné smiled unhappily and gestured toward the knights behind her.

“Sorry. I’d planned on taking care of this by myself, but these fools insisted I bring them along for an early death,” she replied.

“Ha-ha, bit harsh calling us fools, Captain.”

“Don’t go insulting us when you’re the one reckless enough to fight an Undead King on your own.”

The other knights laughed off Diné’s light insult. Though their tone was lighthearted, their expressions showed they were prepared to face the end.

Oh, how wonderful, thought Terios.

The captain would have fought alone to avoid endangering her troops, and they had expected that and all but forced her to bring them along. It was an ideal relationship where those above and those below trusted one another.

That camaraderie was something Terios still hadn’t attained. He narrowed his blue flame-eyes at that which he’d never had a chance at.

“There’s probably no point in bothering, but may I ask what the response to our discussion from the other day is?”

The answer was obvious from the moment a squad of knights in full plate rode up, but he checked just in case.

“On behalf of King Calyx of Erythron Kingdom, Prime Minister Gelan has declared you, Undead King Terios, an enemy of the kingdom who must be eliminated.”

“Oh, I’m honored that you would call a little skeleton like me an Undead King,” joked Terios, but he sensed the pain behind Diné’s formal address.

She can’t stand that it wasn’t the young king but his uncle, the prime minister, who made the order.

He didn’t know the specifics, but he’d heard rumors about the relationship between Diné, the king, and the prime minister when he’d visited the capital before coming to Krio Village and when he’d been there buying food.

Well, no point counting your dragons before they hatch.

No matter what he planned, he had to deal with the knights who were prepared for a battle to the death standing in front of him first.

Terios readied himself. In place of a sword, he raised his mithril staff with both hands, saluting the knights as he declared, “I, Terios, will use you as stepping-stones toward creating a peaceful world.”

“Then our swords can say the rest!”

With the grand declarations of war over, Diné drew her sword from her hip and courageously shouted, “Spread out!”

On her order, the knights quickly urged their horses into a run and put space between one another until they formed a half circle surrounding Terios.

A crescent formation? That’s standard for fighting a magic user.

Knights generally fought in a tight-knit arrangement that they used to punch holes in the enemy’s formation. But magic users could create huge storms of fire that could take out all the knights in one hit if they were bunched together. By contrast, this fighting style worked by intentionally spreading them out. That way, even if a spell hit a knight and knocked them off their horse, another could still pull up on the magic user and finish them off.

This strategy assumes they’ll incur casualties, so if an inexperienced squad uses it, they can fall apart and be picked off one by one. Yet...

The knights showed no indication of fear as they gathered into a formation centered on Diné. They did not intend to fail. As Diné pointed her sword and kicked her horse’s flanks, Terios couldn’t help but be impressed by their training.

“Attack!”

“““Haaaaaaah!”””

The knights let out battle cries and advanced, not a single one out of step.

Against an average magic user, they’d close in by the time their opponent had taken out a few knights. Then they’d pierce the magic user with swords, spears, or even trample them with the horses’ hooves until they were nothing but chunks of flesh. However, Terios was only the third being in history who could appropriately be called an Undead King.

“Swamp.”

The incantation was one short word, yet its impact was massive. As far as the eye could see, the land softened and turned into swamp, trapping dozens of knights.

“What?!”

In a moment so short the knights couldn't even react, their mounts sank into the bog up to their necks, immobilized. Since it was deep enough to sink a horse, the swamp had also ensnared the knights themselves, and they were unable to advance even a single step.

“Cheeky bastard,” spat Diné. With her troops out of the picture, Diné stood on her horse's back and leaped into the air.

Just as it seemed she wouldn't reach Terios and instead plunge into the swamp, powerful flames jetted from the bottoms of her feet, and she leaped as if she were jumping on the air.

“I should have expected something that absurd from the descendant of a god.”

“I don't want to hear it from you,” muttered Diné, holding back her anger as she landed in front of Terios on the only remaining solid ground. “Tell me, why aren't you trying to kill us?”

If he had the power to turn a large area of land into a swamp and could immobilize an entire squad of knights even when they were spread out in a crescent formation, then he could have just as easily filled the same area with a fiery explosion or a cloud of poison. On top of that, he could have drowned both the knights and their horses to death by doubling the depth of the water.

Diné knew how foolish it was to allow an enemy magic user the time to speak unnecessarily, but she just couldn't keep herself from asking.

“The world would be worse off from losing such wonderful people. That, and I've sworn never to kill a human again,” Terios stated in reply.

“...Huh.” Taken off guard and lost for words for a moment, Diné narrowed her eyes sharply like blades. “Was it a lie when you said you would make a peaceful world, even if it meant using force?”

“No, that was no lie. I will forge a peaceful world without killing a single person.”

“Don't bullshit me!” Diné exploded in anger and slashed at Terios with her

sword.

Terios stopped her attack using his staff and, with complete sincerity, replied, “I am not kidding. I am serious.”

“Then you’re an incredible fool. You can’t create a single unified country without killing anyone! Even the Massacre King killed millions of people and only managed to conquer half the continent!”

“Yes, I am well aware.” Terios parried all of Diné’s blows as she attacked him with both her sword and words. “Killing your enemies is the fastest method to success. And the path to a unified country is not so easy that I will never find myself without enemies.”

“Exactly! Just as we are enemies here and now!”

Their ideals and principles weren’t different. The two of them wound up as enemies simply because of their allegiances. Terios would certainly encounter countless more foes in the future.

“Nevertheless, I decided I wouldn’t kill any humans,” he said.

“...Is that so?” Diné abruptly stopped attacking and fell back when Terios repeated his conviction. “And here I thought that, even though you’ve got this absurd dream, if you really truly sought peace, it might be all right to leave my country and His Majesty in your hands.”

If she, the kingdom’s greatest offensive power, fell, then the prime minister would surrender out of fear. That way, Erythron Kingdom and the young king would live on. As far as she was concerned, that was the second-best course of action she could shoot for.

In reality, Terios did not intend to harm the kingdom or its people if they backed off. However, his oath to never kill anyone shattered her nascent trust in him.

“An undead who won’t accept the responsibility of killing people isn’t good for anything. I’ll turn you to ash here,” challenged Diné, the light of red mana emanating from her entire body as she tightly gripped her sword and called to it. “Erupt, Vulcanus!”

The white sword flashed red-hot. As it emanated waves of incredible heat, Diné attacked Terios.

He motioned to stop the attack with his staff but suddenly let go of it and jumped clumsily backward, falling on his bottom. That was the right choice. The mithril staff that he dropped melted and split in two the instant Diné's red-hot blade touched it.

"A fragment of the miracle the God of Fire left in this world... I'd heard tales, but I'm surprised mithril stands so poor a chance against it. Mithril can even pierce dragon scales," stated Terios, wiping his brow as if he were wiping away sweat.

She held her sword directly in front of her and declared, "Know that Vulcanus's flames can burn and cut through anything other than another weapon bearing the miracle of a god."

"Obviously, that would also cut me in half with one slash."

The protection magic on Terios's jet-black robe prevented normal swords from leaving so much as a scratch on him, but it would be no better than paper against a holy weapon.

Although he feared destruction for the first time in ages, he felt far happier to meet such a powerful opponent. Diné came at him again.

"Hah, hiya!"

She had the utmost faith in the power of the holy blade, which could burn through anything simply by touching it, even if she didn't put much force behind her swing. Her sword danced more lightly and quickly than during her prior attacks.

Unable to dodge for much longer, Terios cast another spell.

"Bind."

Chains of light appeared from thin air and wrapped around Diné's arms and legs. It would probably stop her for only a couple of seconds because of her incredible levels of mana, but in that time, he could cast a more powerful spell and trap her completely.

Unfortunately, this plan collapsed in less than a second.

Kaching!

A sound like something shattering came from Diné's chest, and the chains of light binding her instantly disappeared.

Anti-magic?

She must have been wearing a necklace or similar trinket that canceled spells cast on her.

He stopped in surprise for the briefest of moments, and she used that hesitation to unleash a horizontal slash at his skull.

"Hiya!"

"Ah!"

Terios immediately relaxed his knees and let gravity pull him into a crouch, allowing him to evade the blow against his vital spot. However, he was on his knees in front of his opponent. There was no way of avoiding the next attack from this position.

"It's over," murmured Diné calmly. She put all her might into an overhead strike.

Faced with the approaching red-hot holy weapon, Terios muttered the next spell calmly.

"Blade."

A shining pale-blue weapon of light appeared in his right hand, and he parried the flaming holy sword that could cut through anything.

"What?!"

"I heard tales of your sword, so I devised a few countermeasures before our duel."

She was flabbergasted. Her holy blade should have had no equal. In that opening in her defenses, Terios kicked her in the stomach with so much force that it was hard to believe he'd done so while crouched.

"Gah..."

“All right, then. Here I go.”

Diné groaned but quickly regained her lost footing, and it was Terios’s turn to go on the offensive.

She stopped the approaching blade of light with her holy sword. Under normal circumstances, the attacking weapon would have burned and melted, immediately reversing who was on the offensive and who was on the defensive. But Terios’s blade of light was actually clashing with the holy sword without breaking.

“Ack, how?!”

“Take a good look.”

They were locked face-to-face as they pushed on each other’s swords. Terios pointed his eyes to the place where the holy weapon crossed the blade of light. It was difficult to see because of the heat radiating off the sacred armament, but if she looked closely, Diné could spy a tiny gap between the two swords. The woman realized they had never actually touched.

“I specially crafted this armament to constantly emit concentrated mana from the edge.”

Since the mana continued to push back the holy blade without ever touching it, the blade of light was shielded from being burned or cut.

“It can easily slice through steel armor as well. Yet, evidently, it can’t so much as nick a fragment of that miracle the God of Fire left behind.” Impressed by the power of the holy weapon once again, Terios then used powerful mana to further strengthen his body and push harder on his blade.

“Grrr...”

A band of normal men couldn’t stand against Diné’s strength, but she was losing ground. The holy blade, which had disemboweled so many monsters, was now jetting toward her own body.

“Captain!”

The knights, still trapped in the swamp, all started screaming. Just then, Terios suddenly stopped pushing on the blade and quickly moved to the side.

“Hah?!”

With the opposing force suddenly gone, Diné pitched forward. Terios swiped powerfully with his leg to kick at her feet and knock her out of her stance. With a swift motion, he brought his heel down onto her back as she fell, slamming her into the ground.

“Gah!”

An average person would have been split in two by the impact, but she didn’t even release the sword in her right hand, only groaning slightly in discomfort.

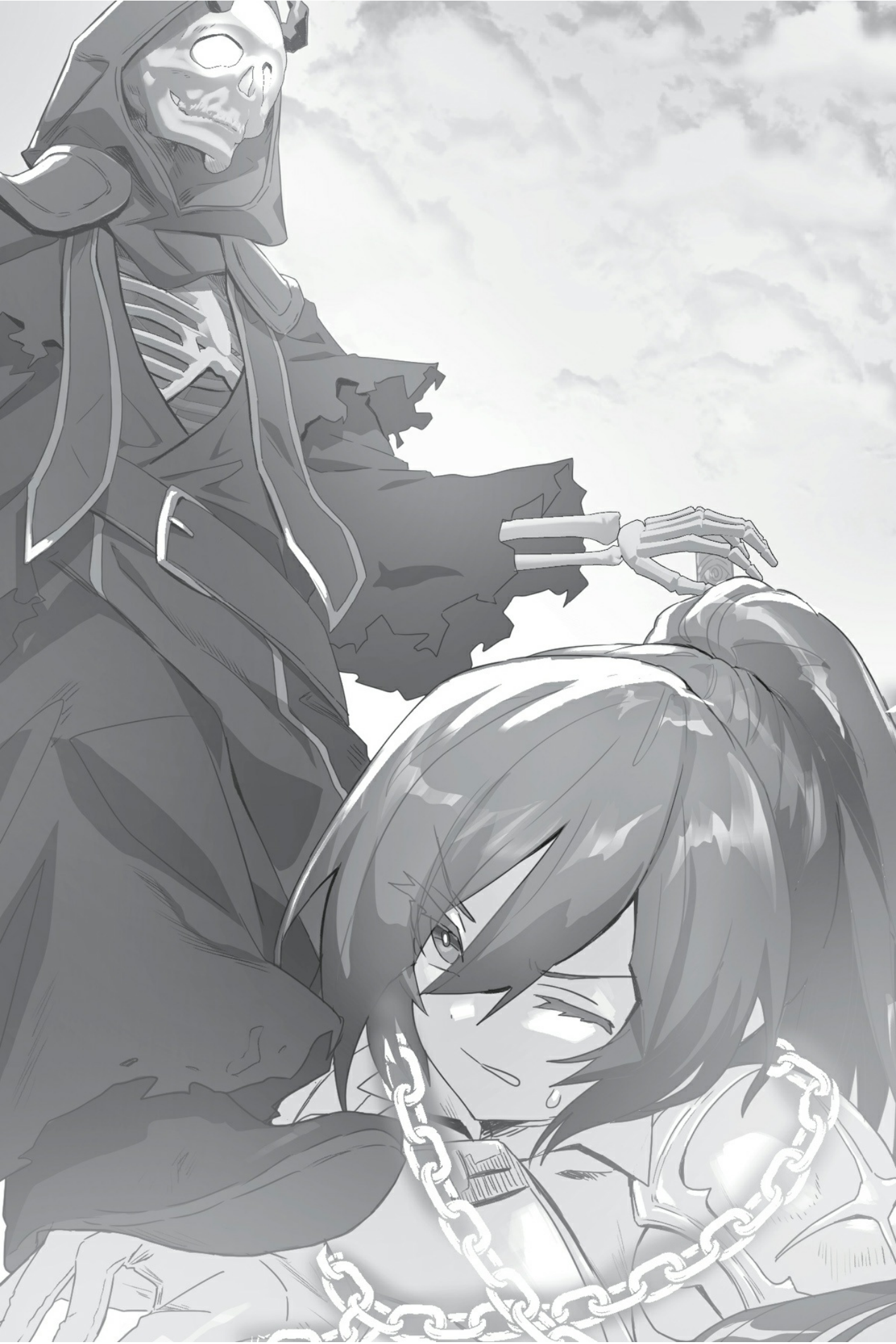
That’s why Terios ruthlessly followed up his attack.

“Bind, Bind, Bind, Bind, Bind...”

He cast a series of spells that brought forth the chains of light that had broken earlier. Diné probably had more than one anti-magic item on her. If that was the case, then casting magic on her until they broke was actually a simple, if heavy-handed, way to counter them. The effect was tremendous, though. By the third casting, the breaking sound from the anti-magic accessories had disappeared. Come the seventh, Diné was fettered so thoroughly that her upper body was practically buried in chains.

“Not yet!” cried Diné.

She tried to remove herself from the chains through brute force, but Terios stood on her right hand with his left foot and waited for her to reflexively release her grip because of the pain. When she did, he quickly kicked the hilt of the holy blade with his free leg.



“Ah...”

The holy sword flew all the way to the swamp, where the knights were still stuck. It plunged in and sank, releasing a huge belch of steam.

With that, Diné had no hope of winning.

“Ack...”

“I apologize for tripping you,” said Terios, removing his foot from Diné’s hand as she relaxed, knowing she’d lost.

“If you would allow me to tell you the reason you lost, it’s because you’re not experienced enough in fighting opponents equal to or more powerful than you.” He hadn’t heard about her past or anything, but he was probably right. “I’ve met a number of holy knights before you. Each and every one of them was blinded by their power. They had no one with whom they could seriously improve their skills.”

Even within families descended from gods, not all children were blessed with powerful mana. How it worked was unclear, but either a family member’s power would suddenly awaken or an incredibly talented child would be born if the current holy knight died or was about to retire. This left them few opportunities to spar against an equal opponent, unless they sought out a holy knight descended from a different god.

“It’s only natural for your skills to grow rusty if you only fight weaker opponents... Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to lecture you,” said Terios, apologizing for suddenly going off on a tangent. Perhaps he’d become too accustomed to teaching the children. With that, he released the chains of light binding Diné.

Although free, the woman didn’t attack. She simply sat compliantly on the ground.

“You’re right. Since my grandfather, the former holy knight, died, there hasn’t been anyone who could win against me. It seems I’ve gotten full of myself,” admitted Diné, reflecting on what Terios said and somewhat relieved to have lost for once.

Her face turned grim, and she stretched her neck out to admit defeat.

“Kill me,” she begged.

“No.”

Terios’s response to the holy knight’s resolute order was quick. But she must have anticipated he would say that. Rather than showing her temper, she simply spoke calmly.

“If you don’t kill me, I’ll aim for your throat time and time again.”

“I also don’t want that. Which is why I’ll have to place a geas on you, so you do as I say.” Terios recited an incantation, and a complicated pattern of light appeared from the tip of his finger. It was a contract spell that forced the person it targeted to obey a specific order.

“You’re going to take away my power instead of killing me? Do you really think that will make me relent?”

“Well, I doubt you’ll give up.” He shrugged as she glared sharply at him.

A geas was powerful, but it wasn’t perfect. The spell could be resisted or even broken depending on the difference in power between the caster and the target. Terios had immensely powerful mana, but Diné wasn’t that far behind as a descendant of a god. Bending her completely to his will was impossible.

A magic user far more powerful than the caster could eliminate the binding contract, too. There likely weren’t any humans on the continent capable of nullifying the geas of an Undead King, but it wasn’t out of the question should Diné manage to locate something or someone of extraordinary power, such as a divine object or a priest willing to sacrifice their life to summon a god.

“Kill me. That’s your best option.” Diné repeated the instructions countless times, as if reproaching him for not knowing any better. “If you are truly striving for a peaceful world, then eliminate your weakness here and now, along with me.”

“...You are a wonderful woman.”

“Don’t screw around at a time like this!” shouted Diné angrily, taking Terios’s remark as a joke, though he’d simply let his true thoughts slip out.

Nevertheless, Terios did not intend to break his oath.

“I am sorry, but I don’t plan on ever killing you, nor anyone else. That method has already failed me.”

“What?”

“That’s right. I failed.” As Diné reeled from his unexpected words, Terios gritted his teeth and recalled the mistakes he’d made when he was alive. “Even if millions of people hated me, I slew my enemies to build a world for the hundreds of millions of children who would be born. I killed, and I killed, and I killed. I believed that could birth a peaceful world.”

Swept away by his memories, he slipped back into the harsh tone of his past as he spoke like he was confessing.

“But I failed. The people I trusted betrayed me. They thrust a blade into my chest.”

However, he didn’t hate the people who betrayed and killed him.

“It was my fault. Their friends and family were among the millions of corpses I created.”

Just as the friend of your friend wasn’t necessarily your companion, if you continued to slay everyone who saw you as an enemy, you would someday have to cut down someone with whom your allies had a relationship. He hadn’t hesitated when that happened. Internally, he’d lamented that it had to be done, but he’d never once shed a tear as he murdered his enemies. It was all for the peaceful world he sought.

But the people he had thought of as friends, the people he had trusted, hadn’t forgiven him for that.

“If you kill someone, someone else will resent you. That resentment grew. It warped into hate, then into hostility that pierced my heart. The country I had built collapsed, and war spread like wildfire across the continent.”

Ultimately, his endless fight for a peaceful world that would save hundreds of millions had thrust tens of millions into calamity. It was the epitome of irony.

“No way. You can’t be...?!” Diné was astonished. He whose identity she had

deduced—Terios—returned to his usual tone and made the same declaration he had before.

“And that is why I have sworn to build a peaceful world without killing a single person.”

No matter how hard the path was, Terios stuck to it to avoid repeating his past mistakes.

“Fortunately, a skeleton like myself won’t die of old age, so there’s no need for me to ‘live fast’ like I did before. You could even say I can now ‘die slow.’” Terios’s teeth chattered as he laughed at what he thought was a clever turn of phrase.

Then he stretched out his finger, the one lit by the geas pattern, toward Diné.

“Now then, will you agree to this?” he asked.

“...I understand,” she muttered, accepting less because he had convinced her that not taking lives was feasible but more because she felt the loser should do as the winner pleased.

She raised her right hand and touched the shining pattern Terios held out. Brilliant light surged forth, and a symbol proving her subordination to him appeared on her right palm.

With that, the holy knight descended from the God of Fire became a pawn of the Undead King, albeit an unruly one.

“No, Captain...”

Despair overcame the knights in the swamp as they watched the most powerful warrior in the kingdom give in to a monster.

Terios slowly turned his gaze to them.

“All right, I would like all of you to accept a geas as well. The contents are that you will not harm the children or me. That isn’t so bad, is it?”

Unlike Diné, they didn’t have to follow his orders, only commit to not attacking Terios or the children. Even so, the knights’ pride wouldn’t allow them to give in to a monster.

“I would rather return my life to the gods than betray my country and bow to the enemy!” shouted a young hot-blooded knight as he brought his sword to his own throat.

At this, Diné shouted, “Stop! Don’t throw your life away!”

“But, Captain!”

The young knight must have been relieved to hear her voice the way it always was. That meant she hadn’t let the hope in her heart die. Though still anguished, he lowered the sword from his throat.

Diné turned to her uncertain troops and gravely gave her orders.

“Live. Go back to the capital. Report everything you saw and heard here to His Majesty without hiding anything. Know that it is the path that will lead to the kingdom’s salvation.”

The Erythron Kingdom had no way of winning against Terios now that they’d lost the holy knight, their most powerful resource. They needed to convince the king and his ministers that the only method of survival was obedient surrender. No matter how ungraceful or pathetic it may be, that was the duty of a knight of the kingdom, the agonizing beliefs Diné’s words contained.

“Captain... As you order, ma’am!”

The knights picked up on her intentions and chose the path of life, tears of sorrow streaming down their faces.

Ah, they’re all such wonderfully capable people.

Terios was again certain that his past self had indeed erred. In those days, he would have mercilessly slaughtered these people if they had been his enemy.

He raised the knights from the swamp and entered a geas contract with each of them, one by one.



Mira and the other children had seen everything from a distant wheat field, including when Terios defeated Diné and chased off the knights.

“Teacher was amazing.”

“Yeah. It was so cool when he and the lady knight were all *clang! clang!* with their swords.”

“I don’t care about that. Is he going to turn that swamp back to a field like before?”

Torio was complaining as usual, but the other children were simply relieved that Terios had won.

Mira smiled widely and ran over to the Undead King.

“Teacher!”

“Oh, Mira! And everyone else as well. I see you’re being bad children and skipping writing practice to watch the fight,” chided Terios.

“S-sorry...”

“I’m just joking. Thank you for being concerned for me.” Terios quickly changed his tune when Mira took him seriously and started apologizing.

“Oh, good.” She exhaled, relieved.

“That one really does look up to you,” said Diné with a shining smile from where she stood behind Terios.

Mira looked at her in confusion and asked, “Huh, isn’t Ms. Holy Knight going home?”

“Oh, I suppose I should explain,” said Terios, realizing the children had been watching from so far away, they hadn’t heard any of the talking.

Terios took Diné’s right hand and showed the children the sigil there.

“I’ve cast a geas spell on her, which makes it so that she has to do whatever I say,” explained Terios.

“What?”

“I lost the fight. Guess it’s better than losing my life,” Diné admitted reluctantly to the dumbfounded children. It was less that the woman was taking over Terios’s clarification and more that she wished to teach the children about the harshness of battle.

Mira didn’t pick up on that at all, however. Instead, her face turned beet red.

“T-Teacher’s a pervert!”

“What?!”

Terios was shocked by her outburst and didn’t understand her train of thought, but she continued yelling at him as angrily as possible.

“You said you could make the holy knight do whatever you want with magic! That’s what a pervert would do!”

“Wait a moment. I didn’t mean it in a weird way!” Desperately trying to deny the accusation, he opened the front of his cloak, “Look, didn’t I explain before that I can’t do perverted things because I don’t have anything there?”

“But Melan said you can still do improper stuff even if that’s true!” cried Mira as she pointed to the black cat, her face flushing scarlet from glimpsing Terios’s white pelvic bones.

“What, are you saying you actually named her? Hang on, that’s not what’s import—”

“Someone with as much mana as you could make a fake penis or even tentacles or something,” appended Melan.

“Wait—what are you saying?!”

If Terios was slightly shaken from hearing Melan’s name, he was even more confused by her ridiculous suggestion.

Diné, Torio, and all the other children edged away from the two bickering parties.

“Is that what you intend for me...?”

“I knew that skeleton was a pervert!”

“What’s a pervert?”

“It’s definitely someone really bad.”

“Yay! Teacher’s a pervert!”

The other children didn’t fully understand the meaning, but they still insulted Terios all the same.

Typically, Mira would have defended him in a similar situation, but spurred on by a vague feeling she herself didn't understand, she kept yelling.

"So you like adult women more than little girls? That makes you a huge pervert!"

"Normally, it's the opposite!" cried Terios.

"I knew you'd like someone with beautiful red hair like Diné more than someone with white locks like mine..."

"I told you—you're misunderstanding!"

Mira's emotions in disarray, tears welled up in her eyes. Terios softly stroked her head.

"I meant what I said before. I think your hair is as beautiful as silver thread," he assured.

"...Really?"

"Yes. No matter what anyone else says, I love it."

Love. The moment Mira heard that word, a warm feeling spread throughout her chest, and she instantly forgot why she was so angry.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee, I love your white bones," she replied.

"O-oh, is that so...?"

For some reason, Terios moved his chin like he was pulling back, then heaved a sigh of relief. However, Melan the black cat tapped his feet with her tail.

"It's too soon to be relieved," she remarked, pointing to Diné's and Torio's hardened faces with her tail.

"I do remember the history books said you took a girl thirty years younger than you as your mistress...", muttered Diné.

"Get away from Mira, you pedophile skeleton!" Torio commanded.

"What's a pedophile?"

"It's definitely someone really bad."

"Yay! Teacher's a pedophile!"

“Isn’t there something wrong with how this ended up?!” snapped Terios, trying desperately to dispel everyone’s misunderstandings.

Once Mira finally got ahold of her senses, she helped Terios calm things down. By the time the uproar quieted, the village children had become quite accepting of the newly added holy knight.



CHAPTER 5 | [An Innocent Hatred](#)

Thoroughly trounced by the Undead King, the knights rode their mud-covered warhorses down the road toward the capital. Each of their faces was dark, displaying deep unease and uncertainty.

“I can’t believe this happened...”

They had hoped for a future where Holy Knight Diné would slay the monster with her holy sword, as she’d always done before. They were also prepared for the possibility that they’d all be killed before they could complete their mission. Not a single one of them had imagined they’d be put under a geas and left alive.

“What’s going to happen to the country now?”

“.....”

Not one answer broke the silence that followed the murmured question.

Terios, the Undead King that appeared in Krio Village, was simply too powerful.

As knights, they fought for a living. They knew capturing an enemy alive was way more difficult than simply killing them. Yet Terios had managed to force dozens of regular soldiers and Holy Knight Diné to surrender without seriously injuring a single person. They didn’t need to bother asking what would happen to the Erythron Kingdom if someone that powerful committed themselves to murder.

“Near as I could tell, the Undead King doesn’t seem like that bad a person, don’t you think?” asked the youngest and newest of the bunch, trying to lift their spirits.

On the way to Krio Village, Diné had told them all about Terios. They’d thought an undead that aimed for a peaceful world was nothing more than a bad joke, but considering they were now leaving with their lives, they were starting to believe it a little.

A number of the other knights nodded in agreement, but the middle-aged lieutenant shook his head.

“I don’t care if he’s good or bad. I don’t want someone that strange unifying the entire continent.”

“Huh?”

“It’s not because he’s a monster or an Undead King. It’s all just too off.” Though the lieutenant was responding to the young knight’s gasp of surprise, he spoke almost as if to himself. “Even a child knows it’s impossible to make a peaceful world where no one ever kills anyone else. He’s got to be wrong in the head if he seriously thinks he can make that happen.”

Terios was trying to accomplish something that no one had managed in the over-two-thousand-year history of the continent of Trokhia. Obviously, it wasn’t meant to be.

“He seems like he’s got good intentions. I don’t think he’s evil or anything. But still, I don’t want our fates to be in the hands of someone that weird.”

“.....”

“Sorry, forget what I said,” muttered the lieutenant as he saw his troops faltering, their faces grim again. He changed the topic. “Anyway, let’s do what the captain said and return to the capital to report everything to His Majesty.”

In the end, the knights were just the kingdom’s swords. It was up to the king to decide where they aimed their blades. There was no point in worrying their minds too much over it. That being said—

“Think carefully about what you’re going to say. If His Majesty is so shocked that he ends up falling ill, then the captain will come after us like a demon, despite us managing to make it out of there alive.”

“Ah-ha-ha!”

The knights all burst into laughter as the lieutenant’s shoulders shuddered in exaggeration. It was such common knowledge that Diné loved the young king like her own little brother that even the new knight knew about it.

“Captain’d probably run to His Majesty, even if she had to go against her geas.”

“Oh, that’s an idea. Let’s write a fake letter saying His Majesty has collapsed

from a serious illness, so we can save Captain from the Undead King.”

The knights joked and laughed together, trying to dispel their insecurity.

Until now, they’d always believed that even if they were anxious, they could at least carry out the orders that Diné had given them.



She had endured horrific pain as she pushed herself to continue walking down the narrow forest path.

The green blotches all over her body from the green rot meant her time was running out. That’s why she had to find help before she perished.

“Huff, huff...”

Her breathing was ragged, and sweat ran like waterfalls down her face, but the next village came into view at last.

The path was blocked by royal soldiers.

“Aah...”

She saw the bows and arrows in the soldiers’ hands and gasped in both sorrow and understanding. The village chief and his family had traveled first to the neighboring village, but they’d taken a long time to return. Thinking this was suspicious, one of the village’s young men had gone to see what was happening. He’d returned and warned them of this, despair plastered over his face.

The Erythron Kingdom had abandoned them. It had given up on the people of Krio Village.

Despite everything, she didn’t stop. She kept trudging on, and the soldiers mercilessly fired arrows at her.

“Hurk...”

Arrows pierced her arm and stomach, and intense pain shot through her body. But the pain was actually the perfect stimulant for her mind, which was hazy from the green rot’s fever.

“I beg of you! Please save my daughter!” she desperately cried to the soldiers

as they fitted new arrows to their bows to finish her off. “I don’t care what happens to me. Please just help her!”

She didn’t even have to look at the soldiers’ anguished faces to know they weren’t going to answer her plea, but that was all she could do to save her beloved daughter. She continued staggering forward, blood pouring from her body.

“Please save my—”

An arrow pierced her chest, cutting off her appeal.

“Gack...”

She coughed up the blood rising in her throat and collapsed. In her slowly darkening vision, she made out the soldiers preparing fire arrows. They were going to burn her to eliminate the green rot.

She didn’t fear her corpse being burned, as Vulcanus, the God of Fire, would guide her to the afterlife. Actually, she felt relieved.

She’d been abandoned by her husband when she didn’t give him children, and that drove her to despair. Her beloved daughter was the light that lit up her hopeless life. Now she mourned, for she would die without accomplishing anything to save her daughter.

That’s why, as the arrows struck her body and engulfed her in flame, she summoned her last ember of fading strength to whisper an apology that no one would ever hear.

“...I’m so sorry, Mira.”

“—Momma!”

Mira awoke to her own scream.

She saw Torio sleeping soundly next to her and realized she was in the bedroom of the village chief’s house. It had all been a dream.

“Huff, huff...”

Mira’s breathing was ragged, like her mother’s had been in the vision. She looked at her arms, but no indication of the green splotches remained.

Yet, the fever and pain she'd felt in her dream had certainly been symptoms of the green rot.

"What was that...?"

Her feelings of guilt must have conjured the images. That seemed likely.

And yet, the anguish on the faces of the soldiers who fired the arrows and the pain of her mother as the projectiles struck, both things she should have no way of knowing about, had all felt so real.

"No way. Did that really happen?" Mira asked herself.

"Looks like you saw someone else's memories."

"Ah?!" Mira jumped up in surprise at the voice that suddenly rang from behind her.

She quickly turned around and saw the usual teasing smiling of the black cat.

"Melan, don't scare me like that..."

"And here I came to check on you because I heard your scream. That's a bit pushy of you, isn't it?"

"S-sorry." Mira couldn't help apologizing.

The cat smiled even wider and added, "More importantly, you've advanced quite a lot as a magic user if you're peeking into other people's memories in your dreams."

"What do you mean?" she whispered so as not to wake the other children, and the cat sighed in annoyance.

"I explained it before, didn't I? Your soul is connected to the arche."

"Yeah, I remember that..."

"The arche really is the center of the world and everything in it. So everything that has ever happened in this world is engraved into the arche. Including the memories of every living thing."

Though Mira was still relatively uneducated, the explanation was enough to give her an idea of what the cat meant.

“Because I’m a magic user, I saw Momma’s last moments in my dream... meaning they were in the arche?”

“Yep,” replied the cat shortly as she patted Mira’s hand with her tail, almost like someone would pat her head in recognition for a job well done. “While they may have been impactful memories from someone you were closely connected to, the fact that you’re unconsciously pulling information from the arche means you really are quite talented.”

“Ah...”

Despite Melan’s honest words of praise, for some reason, Mira started to quiver in fear. Although she didn’t fully understand the extent of her emotions, the black cat seemed to see it coming.

“I told you before, didn’t I? If you want to stay *you*, don’t ever forget who you are,” she insisted.

“...Yes.” Hearing the warning for a second time, Mira took it to heart.

She was actually happy to learn from the dream that her mother had loved her so much that she had kept trying to save Mira until her last breath. But Mira was also frightened that emotions from the arche would wipe away her own spirit as they flowed into her like they were her own, even if they belonged to her mother.

“Does Terios see other people’s memories like this?”

“Hmm, I wonder?” responded the cat, evading Mira’s sudden concern. Then she left the bedroom and walked down the hall. “Hurry up and get breakfast ready. If you make something gross, I’ll cast you into eternal darkness.”

“Uh, okay.”

Mira assumed that Melan’s threats and her insistence that she focus on work was the cat’s way of being conscientious, an attempt to distract Mira from the dream memories. She couldn’t be sure of the cat’s true intentions, but she followed after her and went to the kitchen.

Gazing at the numerous ingredients lined up on the shelves, she brooded over the meal.

“What should I make?”

Before Terios came, they didn’t have choices when it came to food because their ingredients were meager. On a good day, she’d have bean soup or pickled cabbage in addition to their staple food of bread or wheat gruel. Some days ended with her having eaten nothing more than a single boiled taro.

Now, however, they had meat selections that included jerky and sausages, fruits like apples and raisins, and even some red vegetables she couldn’t even recognize. She had no idea how she was going to eat everything.

“Melan, would you be okay with some pork sausage?”

“Stick it in the fire for a bit. I don’t want it raw, and I don’t want it burnt.”

“Okay, I’ll cook some sausages. There’s a bit of bread left over from yesterday we can use. Some honey, too... No, I shouldn’t. Instead, I’ll use this leafy thing that doesn’t look like it’ll stay good for much longer.”

Resisting the urge to eat her favorite thing, she placed the honey back on the self, then took the leafy vegetable—lettuce—that had gone uneaten for a long time because the children didn’t like it. She sliced it up and placed it in a pot to boil and seasoned it with a bit of salt.

“Hmm...”

When she tasted it, a wrinkle formed between her brows. It wasn’t so bad she couldn’t eat it, but it wasn’t delicious by any stretch of the imagination.

I bet a chef in the capital could make it nicer.

The bread that Terios bought for them in the capital didn’t look all that different from the bread they’d always eaten in the village, but the difference in taste was like night and day. The first time Torio, the son of a baker, tried the bread, he cried tears of frustration out of sheer disbelief.

What can I say? Now that I know what’s good, I’m not happy with what I’ve been eating...

The truth of the world was that misfortune and fortune were often two sides of the same coin, and she’d caught a glimpse of the other side. She gazed at her unsuccessful vegetable soup with mixed feelings.

“I want to study cooking, too,” she murmured thoughtlessly.

“I can go along with you if you need a taste tester,” said the black cat before biting the still uncooked sausage.

The black cat always knew so much, but it looked like she didn’t have a clue about cooking—or at least wasn’t willing to teach Mira.

And Terios said he can’t cook, either...

A voice she’d gotten used to hearing over the past five days rang out behind her.

“Morning. You’re up early again.”

Mira turned back to see the holy knight Diné standing there, wiping sweat from her brow. She stared at Diné’s red hair in silence.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Good morning.”

Mira quickly returned the morning greeting as Diné watched in confusion.

The dream she had had this morning must have thrown her off. Her mother’s hair wasn’t as vivid as Diné’s, but it was still red. The phantom image of her mother overlaid on Diné nearly brought her to tears, but she was too embarrassed to tell Diné.

“Ummm, were you practicing with your sword this morning, too?”

“It’s a habit. I feel off if I let my skills rust,” replied Diné energetically to Mira’s attempt to veer the conversation off topic, tapping the holy blade at her waist. Terios had used magic to recover it from the swamp.

She then peered into the boiling pot and said, “Lettuce soup? Nice. I know you need to eat meat, but I’ve heard it’s bad for your body if you don’t eat vegetables, too.”

“But nobody really likes vegetables. I’m worried there’ll be a ton of soup left over.” She grimaced, but Diné thumped her own chest and said she’d take care of it.

“Hey, if there’s too much, I’ll eat it all.”

“Th-thank you.” Mira smiled back with only slight stiffness, glad she could depend on the holy knight.

After Diné lost to Terios, took the geas to follow him, and started living with them, Mira quickly learned about her huge appetite.

More muscular than most weaker men and possessed of superhuman strength, she could crush a rock in her bare fist. Mira understood that meant Diné would have to eat more, but there was something wrong with eating enough to feed four people in one sitting.

But Terios told me she wouldn't eat much...

Diné didn't shrink from the large pot of vegetable soup, big enough to feed ten people. In fact, she looked ready to chug it all down. Mira couldn't believe Diné was human like her.

“Oh yeah, Diné, if you don't mind, could you teach me how to cook?” asked Mira when the idea suddenly came to her. Unlike a village girl from the middle of nowhere, a noble lady born and raised in the capital should know all sorts of cooking techniques.

But instead of nodding pleasantly, Diné's face stiffened.

“Mira, do you know what knights do?”

“Uh, fight?”

“Exactly.”

“.....”

“.....”

The pregnant silence that fell between them told Mira she shouldn't ask any more about this.

At a loss, Mira tried to change the subject, but the black cat leaped on Diné's head and smiled teasingly.

“You mean you're terrible at cooking and sewing and whatnot because you've spent all your time on knight training, is that right, Miss Diné?” mocked the cat.

“Hey, you little!” Her hand shot to her head, but the black cat slipped through

like a snake and leaped over to Mira's head instead.

"You should train your wifely duties, or you'll end up a lifelong virgin girl," teased the cat.

"D-don't call me a virgin!" shouted Diné, her face flushing exactly like Torio's when he was called the same.

Despite knowing it was rude, Mira couldn't help but voice her surprise.

"So you're not married, Diné?"

In these times, it wasn't rare for someone, even a villager, to be married when they reached adulthood at age fifteen. Mira had even heard of nobles who'd been engaged from the moment they were born, since they had to protect their bloodlines more than the common folk. She thought it strange that someone like Diné was still unmarried even though she was over twenty years old. As a holy knight and a descendant of a god, her bloodline was the cream of the crop.

"I'm surprised. You're so pretty, too," she said.

"I'll have you know, it's not like I'm not popular with the guys." Unable to bring herself to anger because of Mira's innocent compliment, Diné explained in a way that sounded a bit like an excuse. "If I, the holy knight, get married and become pregnant, then Erythron will be without its defender, right? During that time, they wouldn't be able to stand against monsters or other countries that attacked."

"Oh, I see." Mira clapped her hands in understanding, convinced because she knew how incredible Diné's sword skills were. "But then, does that mean you can't ever get married, Diné?"



“Even if I don’t get married, there’s still my younger sister in the Staktos family, and I have other relatives. The bloodline of Vulcanus isn’t going to die out,” explained Diné with a smile as Mira looked up at her with pained eyes.

She showed no signs of bravado or resignation. However, her very pride at being able to protect her country actually made Mira feel sad.

“It must be tough being the holy knight.”

“Yeah. So don’t call me a virgin again!” shouted Diné as she went to grab the cat on Mira’s head.

But yet again, the cat skillfully slipped through Diné’s grasp and retreated from the kitchen.

“Oh my, you can’t even catch a little kitty. At this rate, you’ll never beat that perverted skeleton, virgin girl,” said the cat.

“Why, youuuuuu!” Diné let out a roar of true rage and rushed after the cat so powerfully that she almost broke the floorboards.

As if to take the woman’s place, Terios entered the kitchen.

“What was that about? Well, I think I can imagine,” he said.

“Yeah, I think it’s probably what you expect.” Mira laughed, nodding back to Terios, whose shoulders slumped from morning fatigue. “I think Melan likes teasing Diné about as much as she likes doing it to you, Teacher.”

“The greatest boon of capturing Diné might be taking some heat off me now that the cat has more targets,” remarked Terios, half joking, half serious. Then he started getting the dishes ready for breakfast.



After they finished eating breakfast, the children started arithmetic class. In the middle of class, Terios suddenly locked eyes on the empty air.

“Teacher?”

“My apologies, someone has arrived,” replied Terios to their concern. The Alarm spell he’d placed on the road had activated again.

“Is it the military?” asked Diné.

“I would have thought as much, but it only activated for one person,” noted Terios with some confusion. “It would be nice if it were a messenger coming to ask us to negotiate, but I suppose I should just go and meet them.”

With that, Terios cast the Teleport spell and disappeared.

Mira and the children weren’t that worried, assuming he’d be okay, since he’d defeated the holy knight, so Diné took over teaching and had them practice subtraction again.

But after only a short while, Terios reappeared, and everyone’s eyes grew wide.

“Welcome ba— Wh-what happened?!”

“Is he all right? He’s injured!”

On his shoulder, Terios carried a man in armor with three arrows protruding from his back.

“My apologies for scaring you. Torio, could you please clear the table of the learning materials?”

“Y-yeah. Hey, everyone, hurry up and gather your things!” Even the typically resistant Torio knew this wasn’t the time to hesitate. He urged the shocked children into action as he gathered the textbooks and writing utensils.

Terios laid the man facedown on the now-open table. As he did, Diné saw his face and gasped.

“Taurus?! How’d he get these injuries...?”

“I thought he might have been one of your men. I recognized him,” responded Terios, gripping the man’s right hand. There, he saw the symbol of the geas he’d placed on the knights.

“He’s one of the knights from the fight?” asked Mira.

“Yes,” affirmed Terios. “However, I don’t know why he came running to this village after suffering injuries like this.” He looked over at the children, who’d retreated against the wall. “We’re going to be tending to his wounds now. I’m sorry, but would you all please go outside?”

“Is he going to be okay?” asked Torio, speaking for all the children, and Terios nodded firmly.

“I think he simply fainted from relief when he saw me. His life isn’t in danger. I did have him drink a potion just in case, though.”

“Oh, that’s okay, then.” Remembering the potion that had saved them from the green rot, Torio and the other children relaxed, assuming he had drunk the same one.

The children left the village chief’s house, leaving only Terios, Diné, and Mira behind.

“Right, there are quite a few things about this situation that bother me, but first, let’s start with medical care,” stated Terios. He cast Apport and pulled out a mithril dagger and a vial containing medicine for wounds. “I don’t have any bandages. Mira, could you please bring me some suitable cloths?”

“Yes.” Mira rushed from the living room to the bedroom that had belonged to the village chief and his wife. She grabbed some appropriate-looking clothing from the chest of drawers and ran back to the living room.

“Will these work?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you very much.”

Terios took the clothes as Diné deftly snapped off the arrows in the man’s back. She then started cutting his plate armor off, careful not to open his wounds.

“Use this,” said Terios.

“Thanks,” she replied, taking the mithril dagger Terios offered and slicing the leather straps below the man’s armor that were holding it in place so she could pull it off.

With the wounds in his back finally accessible, she sliced open the holes and very slowly extracted the arrowheads embedded in his flesh.

“.....”

Mira dauntlessly burned the medical-treatment process into her mind, used to even more horrific sights from when she’d helped defeat the goblins.

Diné did a double take at Mira, but Terios offered her the wound medicine, and she spread it on his back.

“By the way, can’t you use a Heal spell?” she asked.

“My apologies, but that’s not my area of expertise,” admitted Terios, lowering his head, but then he suddenly turned to Mira. “Could I have you cast Heal instead of me?”

“Huh, can I use magic like that?!”

“Don’t worry. Just try.” Terios patted Mira’s back as she jumped with surprise and tried to refuse. “All you have to do is imagine these wounds healing and recite the incantation. All right, have a go.”

“If you put it that way...”

Though still reluctant, Mira stared at the man’s wounds, imagined them closing like Terios had said, and spoke the word.

“Heal.”

A white, magical light surged from her palms and poured onto the man’s wounds. However, no matter how long they waited, nothing seemed to change.

“Teacher, it’s...”

“You’re right. It’s not working. Do you know why that is?” asked Terios like he’d expected this, though Mira was uncertain.

She thought for a moment about how to answer his question, then said, “Because I couldn’t imagine the wounds healing very well?”

“Correct. And more precisely, you weren’t convinced you could heal the wounds.” He started explaining with satisfaction. “As I described earlier, you need two things in order to cast magic: mana and cognizance, which can also be called a strong belief. You saw the fireball I made, and you were convinced that you could make a fireball as well. That enabled you to use the spell Fireball.”

“But I haven’t seen the Heal spell, and I didn’t believe I could do it, so it failed,” said Mira.

“Precisely.” Terios patted Mira’s head, praising her for fully understanding. “If

you actually see the Heal spell and truly believe you can heal wounds with magic, then you may be able to use it someday. Though some magics have compatibility to worry about, so I can't say for certain you'll be able to."

"Compatibility?"

"Yes. For example, I have seen the Heal spell, but I can't use it very well," he explained, raising a bony hand in front of Mira. "As you can see, I am naught but bone. I have no flesh. That means I don't know what it feels like for flesh to heal."

More accurately, he had forgotten the sensation.

"If you have doubts like 'I don't understand' or 'I can't get a feel for this,' then that weakens your belief, and the magic is more likely to fail. That's why I'm not good at healing-type spells. But instead of using the force of life to heal the wounds, I could use orthopedics, which treats flesh as an object. It may leave it misshapen, but if you're fine with that, I could at least close the wounds."

"We'll pass," said Diné clearly, speaking for the unconscious man to decline Terios's offer. "Also, don't use people's troops as teaching materials."

"S-sorry!"

"Well, with Mira as she is now, a failure would just mean it wouldn't do anything. There was no risk of additional harm," explained Terios remorselessly, even while Mira rushed to apologize.

Sighing, Diné cut the clothes to make bandages and wrapped them around the man's wounds.

"Anyway, do you have any idea why Taurus would come all the way to Krio Village with these wounds?" asked Terios.

"I don't. I think he must have come to ask me for help...," answered Diné, furrowing her brow without the slightest idea why.

As they all fell into contemplative silence, the man, Taurus, slowly opened his eyes.

"Where am—? Agh!"

"Calm down. Don't rush it," Diné urged.

He suddenly tried to stand but groaned when extreme pain flared across his back. Diné quickly put her arms around him and pushed him into a seated position.

After she did, he finally realized who stood in front of him, and he blurted out a wide-eyed cry.

“...Captain, Captain Diné?!”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Oh good, I made it somehow... But that’s not important. Something bad has — Ah!”

“I told you not to rush it.”

She smiled painfully at Taurus while he fidgeted. He was relieved, hurried, and suffering from pain all at once.

“Mira, bring this man some water.”

“Okay.”

She poured water into a cup from the water jug and handed it to Taurus.

“Here you are,” she said.

“Thank you, miss.”

He must have been thirsty, because he slowly drank the water down, taking care not to disturb the wounds in his back. With that, he seemed to finally settle down and explained what happened in a downcast voice.

“Captain, it’s terrible. Prime Minister Gelan has instigated a coup.”

““...What?””

Both Terios and Diné froze and gasped at his completely unexpected statement.

In their stead, Mira fearfully asked, “Um, the prime minister is the next-most-powerful person after the king, right? He instigated a coup... That means he rebelled against the king?”

“He did more than rebel. He locked King Calyx up and stole the throne,”

managed Taurus.

“What?!” Diné bolted up in anger and surprise at hearing the king’s name. “Even though he hated me, he always seemed to dote on his nephew so much... The more concerning matter is how his unlawful acts got through. Didn’t someone stop him?”

“That’s right. I heard talk that people are uncertain about the young king, but I wasn’t under the impression he’d lost so much support that anyone would allow a coup to take place,” Terios added calmly, having recovered from his shock.

Taurus looked in agony as he said, “Gelan announced that Krio Village being destroyed by the green rot was by King Calyx’s design.”

“...What?” This time it was Mira who was taken aback, so stunned that she practically froze into an ice sculpture. “The king tried to kill us with the disease?”

“It’s definitely a false accusation. His Majesty would never do that. Actually, he *could* never,” countered Taurus. “His Majesty is still young, and I feel bad saying it, but he doesn’t wield any real authority. Gelan claimed His Majesty used the captain and colluded with a lich to destroy a village with a disease that had supposedly been eliminated two hundred years ago, but such a thing is beyond his power. It would be pointless anyway!”

“Agreed,” said Terios, nodding strongly.

“What’s this ridiculous hogwash?” demanded Diné, glaring vehemently at Taurus with an expression that had gone past anger into sheer exasperation. “He’s saying I colluded with Terios on His Majesty’s orders?”

“Yes, that His Majesty and the holy knight betrayed the kingdom and aided a monster.”

“Why would we destroy Krio Village with the green rot?”

“To use the villagers as a sacrifice for some evil ritual.”

“For what purpose?”

“The pursuit of incredible power, to be able to destroy any who went against

you...” Even Taurus clearly thought it was the height of idiocy as he answered Diné’s questions.

She nodded deeply as her troop member’s voice got quieter and quieter, then suddenly shouted in rage.

“Asshole! Who the hell would believe that garbage?!”

“There are a lot of people who don’t. A holy knight betraying the nation she’s safeguarded for so long is more than they can accept.”

“Still, the fact that the coup was a success means at least the military or some of the nobles believe him, right?”

“No, I don’t think they trust the story, either. It’s just that they’ve been bribed with money or land...”

“So he went around saying ‘When I become king, I promise—’? Those greedy cretins!” Diné covered her face, embarrassed at their pathetic disloyalty.

Taurus’s face twisted with anger as he watched his captain suffer and continued explaining.

“We didn’t even have time to report to His Majesty when we got back to the capital from Krio Village. The First Knights restrained us, which is how we figured out Gelan had led a coup. Thanks to the lieutenant’s quick thinking, I managed to escape.”

“I see. And what of the others?” asked Diné.

“I think they’re alive...,” guessed Taurus vaguely and painfully. “We Second Knights might be few in number, but we’re knights all the same—the second or third sons of noble families who have warhorses. If he killed us, he’d make enemies of our families. I don’t think the prime minister is that stupid.”

“Me neither.” She nodded in agreement, but Mira felt anxious as she looked at Taurus’s back.

It was probably because he was caught running away, but they tried killing him with bows and arrows...

If things didn’t go well for the others, then—

Just as a downward spiral of horrible thoughts threatened to ensnare Mira...

“Hee-hee. Ah-ha-ha. Aah-ha-ha-ha!”

Terios, who had been listening silently to the conversation, suddenly looked up like it was so funny his stomach hurt and let out horrifying, spine-tingling laughs.

“Terios, this isn’t exactly a laughing matter.”

“My sincerest apologies. Please do forgive me.” He quickly returned to his normal demeanor and bowed his head to Diné, who had quietly but angrily reprimanded him.

He raised his head and sighed to himself.

“I’ve been enjoying my life as a teacher of innocent children so much that I’d completely forgotten the true depths of human evil. I was just laughing at my own foolishness.”

“Teacher?” Suddenly very worried, Mira gripped Terios’s hand.

He squeezed back but didn’t meet her gaze as he spoke like he was apologizing to the entire world.

“It was, without a doubt, Prime Minister Gelan who spread the green rot in this village.”

“.....”

Mira couldn’t find any words, perhaps because she was too surprised or maybe because that suspicion had already formed deep within her heart.

Instead, Diné thought deeply for a moment, then calmly asked, “Could you explain how you came to that conclusion?”

“Of course. I failed to inform you earlier because I thought the issue was resolved, but—,” prefaced Terios before telling Diné about the wererat that had been the source of the green-rot infection.

“You’re saying Gelan sent the wererat?”

“I am. As Mr. Taurus has so kindly explained, this was all a plot by the prime minister to eliminate His Majesty and take the throne for himself.”

“Doesn’t it make more sense to assume a monster carrying the green rot just appeared naturally?”

Without any concrete evidence, Diné remained skeptical. Terios, however, calmly explained his theory.

“First of all, we should question why the green rot’s damage was limited to one village. In a normal situation, I wouldn’t be surprised if it took out five of the villages and towns surrounding Krio Village. It’s that deadly a disease.”

“True.”

“And—” Terios stopped speaking for a moment and looked at Mira for confirmation. She shook her head, telling him he didn’t need to hold back for her sake, and Terios continued. “I assume you’ve heard that the military blocked the road and killed anyone infected with the green rot who went to find help.”

“...Yeah.”

“But that’s the thing. How did the military know the green rot was spreading in Krio Village so that they could block the road beforehand?”

““Oh!””

Diné and Taurus gasped. From a logical standpoint, the military’s response was clearly unnaturally quick.

“The typical course of events would go something like this: A villager would reach a neighboring village to ask for help, and the people who heard it there would head to the capital to report. Throughout all of this contact, the disease would be spreading far and wide. Yet in reality, the road connecting Krio Village to the next was already blocked off. It’s almost as if they knew about the green rot beforehand and feared the damage it would cause if left unmanaged.”

“.....”

“Diné, who was it that made the decisions for countering the green rot, and who was it that dispatched the military?” he asked.

“...It was Gelan.” Diné practically spat the prime minister’s name as fury gripped her face. “He said it was too cruel to have His Majesty make the

decision to abandon the villagers, so he made it himself. Well then, let's give a round of applause to the man pretending to protect people from the mud when he was the one slinging it in the first place!"

"He wanted the throne so much that he'd go that far?!" Even Taurus was so incensed that he struck the table with his fist, the pain in his back seemingly forgotten.

"I'm sure he did want it. And he would have been king if King Calyx wasn't around, which just made him hunger for it more," said Terios with a sigh. As the younger brother of the former king, Gelan was close enough to the throne to taste it, which made him covet it all the more.

Is being king really that great...? Mira wondered. As a simple village girl, she couldn't understand the prime minister's lust for status. She did, however, recognize that the prime minister had stolen her family and neighbors from her to sate his desires.

"It's hard to believe he unleashed the green rot just to frame His Majesty with this nonsense...," noted Diné.

"Actually, I think the original story was going to be much simpler," corrected Terios, shaking his head and countering Diné's painfully muttered words. "It makes sense if you consider what would have happened had I not appeared in the village and became a wrench in his plans."

"If you hadn't come?" asked Mira, carefully imagining what would have happened, even though the thought scared her. "We would have all died of the green rot, and...the wererat would still be there?"

"Correct. The wererat I defeated would still be near Krio Village." Terios patted Mira's head for her doing a good job. "The soldiers who came to investigate the village would discover the wererat, then rush back to report. Then who would be sent out to defeat the wererat?"

"That would be—"

"Me. I'd be the only one," interjected Diné with a heavy sigh, cutting off Mira before she could answer. "It was a wererat with the green rot, right? It would be a different story if we were in an open field, but gathering a lot of normal

soldiers to chase it down in the forest would only result in unnecessary deaths.”

“Unfortunately, even we wouldn’t be able to handle it,” added Taurus, agreeing with Diné even though it stung.

“Wererats are dangerous. They don’t even have to fight; they need only to scratch someone or spit on them to infect them with some disease, and then it’s just a matter of keeping their distance. A regular person wouldn’t stand a chance.” Terios had dispatched it so handily that it might be easy to underestimate wererats as weak, but in reality, they spelled terrible danger for humans. “And Diné the holy knight is extraordinary, so she would probably be able to defeat it, but...”

“I’d die. I’d get the green rot.”

Mira was somewhat surprised at how readily she acknowledged that.

“Diné, you can’t beat a sickness, either?” she asked.

“I may be descended from a god, but in the end, I’m still human. Even the immortal demigod Arkhaia met his end from poisoning. There’s no way I could prevail against toxin or disease.”

“That’s true,” noted Mira. Humans died easily, even those as powerful as Diné. That being the case, to make a truly peaceful world without fear of death —

Mira realized her thoughts were treading a dangerous path. She quickly chased them from her mind, while Terios started to wrap up the conversation.

“Diné and the wererat would kill each other. His Majesty would fall into depression, from grief or from blaming himself. The prime minister was then planning to suggest the king abdicate so that he could claim the throne without issue.”

“And if His Majesty didn’t agree to abdicate—? Ah, Gelan would then add on the story about him working with a monster and destroying Krio Village for an evil rite, then lead the coup,” postulated Diné, souring as she realized the answer to her own question.

“Precisely. My arrival wasn’t according to his original plan, so he took what

was at first just a backup plan, repurposed it, and sort of forced it to work. That's how we got here," said Terios. They had no proof or testimony to back his conclusion, but no one could think of any other explanation.

"You've managed to save my life without me even knowing it."

"Guess we should thank you for that or something..."

Both Diné and Taurus bowed their heads in genuine gratitude.

"No need. It was just a coincidence. It's really not that big a deal," said Terios.

"That's right. A skeleton's not going to jump to the rescue just 'cause you flattered him." The black cat, unseen until now, suddenly popped up on Mira's head as Terios scratched his jawbone in embarrassment.

"Wh-what's with that cat?!" cried Taurus.

"This is Melan. She likes teasing, but she's not a bad person."

"Well, she's not even a person," quipped Diné, slightly grimacing as Mira introduced the feline who had caused Taurus to leap in surprise.

While they did that, Melan tapped Terios's face with her tail to urge him on.

"You're done with this drawn-out conversation, aren't you? So get moving, then."

"Get moving?" asked Mira reflexively, and Melan looked at her with a particularly evil smile.

"Isn't it obvious? He's got to retaliate against the prime minister."

"Ah..." She jumped slightly.

"Melan's right. We can't leave Gelan like this," said Diné as she stormed toward the door.

"Diné, *wait, please.*"

"Ah?!"

With Terios's spoken command, the geas on Diné went into effect.

As soon as she abruptly ground to a halt, she turned back clumsily like she was fighting a powerful force.

“Terios, I don’t care if you’re the one giving the command. I won’t listen to an order to leave Gelan alone,” she managed.

“I know, but it’ll be a headache if you just rush off to the capital like you are.” Terios smiled out of both admiration and frustration toward Diné’s strength of body and emotions, impressed she could move that far while resisting his magic. “I will accompany you. I’ll use Teleport, so wait before you march to the capital on foot.”

“Tsk, if that’s the case, you should have just said so.”

Smiling wryly because she had jumped to conclusions and pointlessly struggled against the geas, Diné moved back to Terios and bowed her head to him.

“Will you help me give Gelan what he deserves and save King Calyx?” she requested.

“Gladly.”

Terios easily understood how this was also a step on the path to building a peaceful world.

Just as he started to cast Teleport, Mira gripped his robe tightly.

“Mira?” he asked, stopping his casting in surprise. She looked up at him and slowly turned the fire burning in her heart into words.

“Teacher, please take me with you.”

“...No.” Terios paused for a moment, then quickly shook his head. “I want you to stay here this time.”

“No. I’m going, too.”

Terios tried to gently remove her hand locked on his robe, but she gripped more tightly in resistance.

“I know it’d be fine because it’s you, and I’m only one more person,” asserted Mira.

After the defeat of the holy knight, there was no one left in the Erythron Kingdom who could stand a chance of beating Terios. One child dragging him

down wasn't enough to even handicap him.

Mira remained insistent with her arguably true reasoning, and Terios scratched his jawbone in consternation.

"Well, it's not really about you slowing me down. It's—"

"Stop being so stubborn and take her with you," yowled the cat, butting into the conversation and tapping Terios with her tail again. "It'll be good for her to learn how the world works. Right, *Teacher*?"

"When it comes to learning, there are some lessons for good and others for ill."

"How about this. If you say no, I'll take her myself, okay?"

"...How amusing," said Terios, glaring at the unusually assertive cat with a pained expression.

He looked down at Mira, still gripping his robe tightly, and then his shoulders slumped in surrender.

"Please just avoid doing anything rash."

"I will."

"Good. All right, shall we get going?"

As Mira nodded resolutely, Terios took her hand and started casting the previously interrupted Teleport spell.

A brilliant, magical light engulfed them. Struck with a floating sensation and vertigo, Mira started to feel her consciousness fade. The next moment, she was standing in front of a massive building surrounded by high stone walls. It was the royal castle in the center of the Erythron Kingdom.



A guard looked up at the dark sky filling with heavy rain clouds and sighed.

"It's like a harbinger of this country's future," he remarked.

"Don't say such gloomy things. You just need to believe that things will get better with the new king," said another guard standing next to him, but the lack of hope in his expression contradicted his statement.

“His Majesty and Lady Diné would never betray us. It’s just a plot by the prime minister, isn’t it?”

“It’s His Majesty King Gelan now. Be careful what you say. Just keep it to yourself.”

With the military and nobles on Gelan’s side, there was nothing mere foot soldiers like them could do about it. The second guard patted his fellow’s back, his own expression one of resignation.

In front of them stood a skeleton in a black robe, a far-too-famous holy knight, and a little girl, yet the guards didn’t seem to notice.

“An Invisibility spell?”

“No, it’s actually Unrecognizable.”

While Diné murmured so that the guards couldn’t hear her, Terios responded at a normal volume.

“It interferes with their minds, making it so they can’t recognize us, even though they can see us. Though it wouldn’t stop them from noticing us if you shouted or punched them, for instance,” explained Terios as he nonchalantly passed by the guards and entered the castle gate.

“Wow. They can’t see us, even though we’re right in front of them,” admired Mira.

“It’s the perfect position from which to launch a surprise attack. This is what makes magic users so terrifying.” Diné sighed as she followed Terios.

“The spell isn’t perfect, though. It’s still magic at the end of the day, so a magic user can sense it from the mana response. Even a normal person with keen senses could detect something was off if they were paying careful attention,” explained Terios as he looked up at the magnificent castle. “First, we should rescue the king.”

“Yeah. It’ll be dangerous if Gelan has him as a hostage,” agreed Diné. She pointed to the towers on the four corners of the castle. “I don’t think he’d keep someone as high-ranking as royalty in the underground cells. The king’s probably in one of those towers.”

“You may be right... Most likely on the highest floor of that one,” said Terios as he narrowed his eyes and looked between the four towers before pointing to the western tower.

“What do you base that on?”

“I sense mana from two people there. I think it’s appropriate to assume they’re magic users stationed to guard His Majesty.”

“I see. In that case, you’re probably right.” Diné looked up at the western tower as well. She might not have been able to sense it as clearly as Terios, but she, too, detected the mana.

The woman passed confidently through the front gate into the castle proper, then strode down the hall toward the western tower. Terios and Mira quickly followed.

“I know they won’t catch us, but it’s still a little scary,” said Mira, gripping Terios’s hand anxiously as she watched the soldiers and nobles cluelessly pass them by.

“There’s a saying that goes ‘A cowardly mouse is more frightening than a foolish lion.’ It’s good to be cautious,” praised Terios as he pulled Mira by the hand and headed farther into the hallways.

Opening the door in the castle’s western corner and entering the tower, they skirted a pair of oblivious guards engrossed in a game of cards, then climbed the spiral staircase.

Diné was in the lead as they approached the highest floor, but Terios grabbed her shoulder to stop her.

“If we go any farther, the magic users will notice us. I can neutralize them with a Sleep—”

“Nope, don’t need it.”

Diné brushed Terios’s hand from her shoulder, then practically flew up the stairs. Then—

“Gah!”

“Gurgh!”

There was the sound of two heavy blows, and the tower returned to silence in the blink of an eye.

Terios and Mira rushed up to the highest floor to find Diné standing casually over two men who looked like magic users and were collapsed unconscious at her feet.

“This is faster,” she said.

“Wow...”

“I suppose I should say this is what makes holy knights so scary.”

Before she knew it, Mira was clapping out of admiration, and Terios actually joined in on the applause, too.

Diné didn’t act bashful. She pointed to the iron door behind her and asked, “Can you open that? These two don’t seem to have a key on them, and I might injure His Majesty if I cut it open with Vulcanus.”

“Of course, let me take care of it.” Terios nodded and cast Unlock.

In an instant, both the physical and magical locks unlatched at the same time, and the door slowly opened.

“Oh, I need to let down Unrecognizable as well,” Terios realized aloud. The moment he dismissed the spell, his eyes met those of a young boy, cute like a little girl, sitting on the bed in the narrow room.

“A s-skeleton?!”

“Your Majesty!”

The boy, the young king Calyx, started to scream when he saw Terios, but Diné rushed to him and threw her arms around him.

“Your Majesty, are you injured? Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Diné... Diné, is it really you? I’m not dreaming?”

The holy knight poked around the king’s body in concern, which he must have thought was a hallucination brought on by the despair of being locked up.

She gently took his hand as he reached out to brush her cheek.

“Yes, it’s me. I’ve come to rescue you.”

“Oh, Diné!”

Finally realizing it was real, Calyx buried his face in her chest and started sobbing.

“Uncle suddenly told me he was trapping me in here because I was bad... He said you were dead!”

He had been betrayed and left without help, so he must have been afraid of being executed.

Diné didn’t scold the boy for his lack of royal composure or for his wrinkled face and sobs. She just gently hugged him.

“I’m sorry it took me so long. It’s all right now,” she reassured him.

“Waaah, Diné...”

As they waited for him to stop crying, Terios bound the unconscious magic users.

“First, you stuff a cloth in their mouths, then gag them. That will at least make them unable to recite incantations. You can’t let your guard down, however, because some very skilled people can cast spells without incantations.”

“Okay.”

Not letting a teachable moment go to waste even in a time like this, Terios then thought Calyx must have had time to calm down and so entered the room.

He had stopped crying, but he shrieked again when he saw Terios.

“Ah! ...Impossible! Is that the Undead King?!”

“Your Majesty, please relax. He is not our enemy,” informed Diné.

“I noticed you didn’t call me an ally, though.” Terios slightly sulked as Diné calmed Calyx down.

He then gave a deep bow to the young king.

“I am honored to meet you, Your Majesty, King Calyx. I am indeed the Undead King who appeared in Krio Village. My name is Terios. And this is Mira, a girl I

am instructing.”

“N-nice to meet you,” stated Mira, nervously lowering her head to the boy who was both younger and shorter than her.

Their politeness finally set Calyx at ease.

“It’s like Diné said; you aren’t a bad person, are you?”

“No, at least not as bad as Gelan,” said Diné.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” asked Terios in confusion, but Diné got on her knees and bowed low, her expression serious.

“Terios, please allow me to thank you again for assisting me with freeing His Majesty. And while it may be bold of me, may I ask—?”

“To help you bring down the prime minister? Of course I’ll help.” Terios guessed what Diné would ask and answered before she could finish the question, and she smiled happily.

“I wouldn’t have cared if you’d just protected His Majesty while I went to cut down Gelan.”

“Well, you’d probably be fine by yourself, but we won’t have any unnecessary injuries if I tag along.”

Though Terios didn’t say as much, he also accompanied her because he didn’t want anyone to die.

“Right, where’s the prime minister now?” he asked.

“At this time, he’s probably in the middle of holding audiences. I imagine he couldn’t wait to sit on the throne he’s just stolen,” guessed Diné.

“You’re probably right.”

Terios nodded back to Diné, whose expression was twisted in anger, then recast Unrecognizable and descended the spiral staircase.

The whole time they were walking to where the prime minister was, Mira kept her eyes turned down to conceal her expression.



As more rain poured down, the audience hall darkened even more. Guarded

by a large company of soldiers, Gelan sat atop the throne as he conversed with General Chelidon, the captain of the First Knight Squadron.

“Your Majesty, Baron Vous and many other nobles are requesting an audience with you.”

“I imagine they will insist I release their sons, who were under Diné. I thought I told them I’d release them immediately if their sons swore fealty to me.” Gelan sighed heavily, having had the same conversation multiple times. “Instead, they just keep repeating some meaningless story about how Diné didn’t die, even though she lost the fight. Like the evil Undead King would let his mortal enemy, a holy knight, live—”

“Unfortunately for you, I’m not dead.”

“—Huh? Did someone say something?” Gelan looked around him, thinking he’d heard the voice of Diné herself. That’s when it happened.

“Blockade.”

A low voice sounded, and a wall of blue light sprang into existence around the audience chamber.

“Wh-what is this?!”

“An assault from a magic user?! Call for reinforcements!”

Though Gelan lost his cool, the general was the quickest to grasp the situation and shouted orders to one of the soldiers standing near the door. However, as the soldier reached to open the door, a wall of light immediately repelled the attempt.

“I can’t! It won’t budge!”

Many people tried throwing kicks at the door, and some even tried stabbing it with their spears, but the wall of light didn’t move an inch.

In front of Gelan and his captive audience, four people appeared like they’d been there the whole time.

“Incredible. This is the first time I’ve seen such large-scale magic,” admired the young king Calyx, his eyes shining as he looked around. He should have been sealed inside the western tower.

“That fact that you haven’t seen even this much and no one’s realized it just shows how lacking our country is in good talent.” The holy knight Diné sighed with a mixture of exasperation and sorrow. She should have been dead.

“To prevent surprise attacks such as this, you should get in the habit of monitoring the flow of mana at all times,” noted Terios, the Undead King, leisurely conducting a lesson.

“...Okay,” said the white-haired village girl, Mira, as she nodded back, but her angry eyes were locked on the prime minister.

“Y-you! How are you here?!” Gelan cried out in terror at the sight of the four of them.

“Long time no see, *Prime Minister*,” spat Diné, smiling sarcastically at the traitor who was sullyng the throne by acting like he owned it. “I don’t remember the prime minister’s duties including dusting the throne with his ass.”

“Urgh...”

“What are you doing? They’re intruders! Seize them!” shouted the general, hastily returning to his senses, while Gelan was too shocked to say anything in response.

Unfortunately, the guards were shaking so much that they were paralyzed.

“There’s no way we can capture Lady Diné!”

“And that skeleton is the Undead King that defeated the knights...”

Just one look at the barrier spell sealing them in was enough for them to realize Terios’s awesome power.

They felt both dread and understanding that even if they gathered together all the soldiers in the castle, they wouldn’t be able to so much as scratch this group, let alone if the ten or so guards in the room tried on their own.

“Cowards!” The general drew his own sword after seeing that not a single one of the guards could move.

He was well aware that he couldn’t win, but he had his pride as the person in charge of the royal military. The general couldn’t let himself surrender without

trying to fight back at all.

Though Terios appreciated the general's spirit, he cast a spell to ensure no undue injury.

"Bind."

Innumerable chains of light appeared and wrapped around not only the general but also everyone besides Gelan.

"Urgh..."

"General Chelidon, there's much I want to say to you, but I'll leave it for later," announced Diné as she passed by the snarling general. She drew the holy blade from its sheath and pointed it at Gelan, his face pale as he stood from the throne. "I don't care if you're in the royal family. Leading a coup is a crime punishable by death. I assume you're prepared?"

"...Sh-shut up!" Enraged, Gelan suddenly shouted as Diné gave him a death glare that could freeze blood. "A coup? You're the ones who betrayed the kingdom!"

"Are you going to talk some more rubbish about how we collaborated with a monster in some evil ceremony?"

"That's not what I mean!" Gelan refuted Diné's exasperated words, then pointed at the silently observing Calyx. "I'm saying it was my incompetent nephew who betrayed the Erythron Kingdom!"

"Are those your last words?"

"Don't brush me off! Even you know well enough that he doesn't have what it takes to be king!"

"....."

Emboldened by Diné's telling silence, Gelan spoke even more forcefully.

"What has he done since my brother died and he took the throne? Not a single thing! The cabinet and I have done everything. We're the ones who supported the kingdom!"

"Isn't that a prime minister's job?"

It was the prime minister's responsibility to conduct state affairs in place of the young king. In fact, the late king, Gelan's older brother, had approved of and requested this of the prime minister.

Diné took a step forward at the idiotic excuse for his betrayal, but Gelan didn't relent and continued shouting.

"Even if a lion cub is immature, I would happily support him. But that boy is nothing like my courageous brother. He's just a cowardly rabbit, hiding and trembling behind your back!"

"He's right," said the general, agreeing with Gelan, though he was still restrained. "Calyx is kind and good, but he isn't suited for the throne. If that spineless child remained king, the kingdom would someday fall to ruin."

"Is that why you cooperated with Gelan in the coup?" questioned Diné.

"It is," admitted the general immediately to her question.

Across the chamber, it seemed many of the guards held the same opinion.

"Your Majesty, will you allow them to speak like this?" asked Terios.

"Urgh..."

Although Terios was trying to coax a counterargument from the boy, he just looked miserable as tears welled up in his eyes.

"See! Everyone worried about his lack of responsibility! That's why I did what I did and why no one tried to stop me, except you!" barked Gelan.

"....."

Diné stood in silent shame. While she had been away when it happened, the fact that Gelan's coup went so smoothly meant that, unfortunately, not enough people believed in Calyx.

"Do you understand now? If you're thinking of what you can do for this country, you should just abandon your holy blade and disappear somewhere with that nephew of mine!" said Gelan arrogantly, the tables quickly turning so he was talking down to her and telling her to let him be.

Before the furious rage welling within Diné could explode, Terios's teeth

chattered in laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha, you really go on and on, don’t you? Perhaps you should have aimed to become a jester instead of a king or prime minister.”

“You bastard!” shouted Gelan angrily in response to Terios’s provocation, but that was enough to make him stop. He was at his limit.

“Now, it may not be my place to point this out, but there is absolutely no connection between King Calyx being ill fit for the throne and your coup being just.”

“What?!”

“Well, you see, the worst kind of incompetent ruler is foolish but has the authority to enact change, and in that case, I might have agreed that you had no choice. But that’s not the situation with King Calyx, is it?”

“Urgh...” Gelan couldn’t respond immediately. That in itself was an answer.

“As you so rightly called him, King Calyx is a cowardly rabbit. He probably wouldn’t have complained as long as you gave him somewhere to live, some food, and perhaps a pretty lady so that he wouldn’t die from loneliness.”

“Don’t talk about His Majesty like he’s some sex addict,” groaned Diné, unaware that the pretty lady Terios was referring to was her.

He smiled apologetically, then continued to address Gelan.

“He may be cowardly and incompetent, but he’s also the most harmless rabbit there’s ever been. There is no more perfect human resource to become a puppet for the prime minister to control from the shadows.”

Things wouldn’t change even when Calyx grew up. It would have been relatively easy for Gelan to keep doing the true ruling as the prime minister.

“Instead of standing at the fore and being the target of criticism, you could have manipulated everything from behind. It sounds like a pretty good deal to me. What about that were you not satisfied with?”

“Tsk...”

“Oh, you don’t have to say it.”

Driven into a corner, Gelan faltered, and then Terios suddenly returned to the cruel tone of his former life.

“You wanted the throne that badly, huh? Even if it meant destroying an entire village.”

“Grrr...”

From behind Terios came the sound of Mira grinding her teeth in rage.

But he chose to act like he hadn't heard it just now and glared at Gelan.

“You used a green-rot-infected monster to kill nearly a hundred of your citizens, then schemed to kill the holy knight, the heart of the country's defense. At that point, you lost all ability to argue that you were doing it for the country.”

“Why you!” roared Gelan, furious that his plans and true intentions had been laid bare.

At that, Terios shrugged as if to say, *Oh well*.

“Don't you think you should deny those allegations? Everyone may have had an inkling before, but now they're certain.”

Gelan realized a moment later, but it was already too late.

“It was Lord Gelan who spread the green rot in Krio Village?!”

“I did think there was no way King Calyx and Lady Diné would do that...”

“Morons.”

The guards cried out in shock at hearing the news, but the general seemed to have suspected this from the beginning and just clucked his tongue in disappointment.

“You are surprisingly horrible,” Diné mentioned to Terios.

“A certain monster cat trained me,” replied Terios, awkwardly smiling in response to Diné's compliment and cloaking his thanks in a teasing insult.

The cat had disappeared at some point, but she was probably watching from somewhere with a wicked smile of enjoyment.

Terios pushed away that image of the black cat from his mind, then gave his final warning to Gelan.

“Now, it’s clear as day you’re a usurper of the throne, acting for your own self gain. Will you surrender quietly?”

“...Heh.” Gelan paled at having been backed into a corner, but he suddenly grinned. He raised his right hand, adorned with a gold ring, then shouted, “Come, Throne!”

The ring emitted massive amounts of mana. A fissure formed in the air, and a creature drifted through.

“What is that?!” gasped Diné. She’d defeated any number of monsters, but she’d neither seen nor heard of something like this.

It was a clump of four blazing wings that continued to rotate in the air like a wheel. It had no face, arms, or legs. While it definitely didn’t look like an animal, it didn’t look like a spirit or a ghost, either, nor did it leave an impression of consciousness.

It was almost like a worker bee that simply obeyed orders from its queen, or maybe even a piece of machinery like a waterwheel. In every respect, it was simply a collection of power.

“Throne...,” muttered Terios, racking his brain because he felt like he’d heard the name somewhere before. Mistaking his silence for intimidation, Gelan smiled triumphantly.

“You may have said your piece, but it doesn’t matter if I take you out here. Actually, I shouldn’t have shown mercy to my nephew—I should have done this to him from the start.”

Gelan glared at the trembling Calyx, then gave an order to the wheel of blazing wings.

“All right, kill everyone here other than me!”

“What?!” cried the general and the guards, realizing Gelan was going to kill them to keep them from talking.

The Throne rotated more violently, and flames burst forth from its wings, and

then—

“Ice Wall.”

Suddenly, Terios’s spell summoned a massive block of ice that blocked the Throne’s flames.

“What? The Undead King protected us...?”

“Diné,” he called to the holy knight as the guards stared frozen in shock.

However, she was already on the move.

“Erupt, Vulcanus!”

She squeezed the hilt of the holy blade, and it grew red with heat, then the woman pointed the weapon at the floating Throne.

“Fool, like flames will work against a burning wheel!” growled Gelan, sneering because he’d chosen this specifically on the off chance that he had to fight Diné.

But she didn’t hesitate. Flames burst from the bottom of her feet, speeding her on even faster as she rushed to slash the Throne.

“Hiya!”

The red-hot holy blade struck the wheel of blazing wings. There was the briefest of moments when the two seemed to push back on each other, but before anyone noticed, the Throne was already split in two.

“Wha—?!”

“Did you really think that the flames of the God of Fire, Vulcanus, couldn’t cut through some fire monster?” Diné beamed valiantly at Gelan, who was at a loss for words, her hair gracefully fluttering as she landed.

Behind her, the slashed-in-half Throne fell apart, turned into particles of light, and disappeared.

While Mira stood captivated by the dreamlike beauty of the sight, the black cat suddenly appeared at her feet.

“My, oh my, it’s already over. Well, I guess the wreckage of an apostle who’d lost both their king and their faith did the best an antique could.”

“Melan?”

“What do you know about—? No, we’ll deal with that later.” Terios almost questioned the smugly knowing cat, but he stopped himself and looked back at the king’s throne.

There, Diné was raising the holy blade against Gelan, who’d collapsed after losing his ace in the hole.

“W-wait! The country will fall without me!”

“Give your apologies to the former king in the afterlife, Gelan.”

Diné brought her sword down, refusing to listen as he disgracefully begged for his life.

But before she could strike, Terios gave her a quiet order.

“Diné, *please, stop.*”

“Ah! What are you doing?” shouted Diné angrily as the geas magic activated and froze her with her sword held high. “You can’t possibly be planning to tell me not to kill this traitor?”

“That’s exactly what I’m doing. *Please don’t kill Gelan.*”

“Grah!”

Under multiple commands, Diné’s hands moved of their own accord and lowered her sword. She didn’t, however, follow the order so far as to sheathe it.

“Terios, I understand that you’ve sworn never to kill another person, but I cannot comply in this case. How else could you resolve this situation other than taking his head and clearing His Majesty’s name?”

“Well, I suppose your way is the fastest,” admitted Terios, quickly agreeing with Diné’s opinion after calm evaluation of the situation, rather than out of rash anger. “However, what about what he said? That the government won’t survive without him?”

“.....”

Diné fell silent, refusing to respond.

Gelan had indeed supported the country over the past year, ever since the

previous king had died.

“He might be too ambitious, but he isn’t an incompetent prime minister. I’ll cast a geas on him so that he won’t ever betray King Calyx again. With that, wouldn’t he work hard for the country?”

“But then we can’t clear His Majesty’s name of the lies Gelan told, like that His Majesty betrayed the kingdom.”

“What if we prepare another criminal to take the fall? The prime minister will apologize for also being deceived, and His Majesty will graciously pardon him.”

“...No, that won’t work.” She shook her head after a moment of thought. “If we don’t give a punishment for the crime, then people will think even less of His Majesty than they do now, and another Gelan will appear. Of all people, you must understand that countries must occasionally wield fear to avoid ruin.”

“I do, more than I’d like.” There was no point in lying or avoiding it, so Terios couldn’t do anything but agree. “Even so, I don’t want to kill the prime minister.”

He’d sworn never to slay another person. That wasn’t limited to himself; he also wanted to prevent others from killing as much as he could.

With that resolve in mind, he locked eyes with Diné, and they stared each other down.

“Have you finished making your cases? If so, perhaps we should leave the final judgment to the person most suited,” suggested the black cat from behind Terios. Her voice was both mirthful and frigid enough to chill you to the bone. He quickly swung back.

There, he saw the mithril dagger they used in treating Taurus gripped in Mira’s small fist. Her eyes burned with a hatred as black as her hair was white.



Mira didn’t understand Diné’s reasoning for killing the prime minister. She didn’t understand Terios’s reasoning for not killing him. She didn’t understand the politics involved. It was all too complicated.

After doing her best to comprehend, she concluded that both choices had

their pros and cons. No matter how much she racked her brain, this dilemma wasn't like an arithmetic problem. She wouldn't ever come up with an answer that was undoubtedly correct.

And if that was the case, it was just a question of what she wanted. All she could do was leave it to emotions.

“.....”

“Mira, don't.” Terios panicked uncharacteristically, moving to block her path as she wordlessly crept toward the prime minister. “Don't. You can't kill the prime minister.”

He had already fully explained his reasoning, so Mira didn't ask him why. But while her heart burned with bitter hatred, her mind, as cool as ice, quietly strung a response together.

“Teacher, you told me. You said, ‘When you point a weapon at another person, you must be prepared to take their life or have yours taken.’ This person killed Momma and my friends, which means he's prepared to die, right?”

“But...” Terios couldn't reply immediately as he struggled to counter his own teaching.

She quietly looked up at his indecision.

“I thought what you said sounded wonderful, about making a peaceful world that would last for a thousand years, a world where disease or wars wouldn't kill people.”

Her feelings about that hadn't changed at all.

“And so I didn't understand why Diné was so angry when she fought you.”

She'd watched the fight from afar, so she hadn't heard a majority of the conversation, but some of Diné's angry shouts had carried on the wind and reached her ears.

“You can't create a single unified country without killing anyone!”

Attaining a peaceful world without killing a single person. The holy knight had criticized Terios for that wonderful dream, had claimed it was impossible, and

Mira had actually felt angry at her for suggesting that.

But Mira had been wrong. She now knew she was the one who hadn't understood anything.

"Teacher, you know I want to kill him."

She gazed at Gelan, who was frozen stock-still, and spoke openly about her desire to kill him.

"When I was sick with the green rot, it was so hot, and it hurt so bad. I was afraid of dying, but it hurt so bad that I actually wanted to die... Momma and all the other villagers felt the same."

That morning in her dream, she'd experienced firsthand her mother's pain and emotions. It strengthened her guilt but also her gratitude for everyone.

"Everyone hurt so bad, but they still tried so hard to help us. But..."

They were slaughtered. It was all the fault of Gelan, who had spread the green rot in the village in the first place and then ordered the military to keep it from reaching himself.

"Momma; and Torio's mom and dad; and grumpy old Boll; and Carpo, who'd just gotten married; and baby Margarita, who'd just been born... All of them, they're all dead because of him!" shouted Mira, hate flaring in her eyes as she pointed the mithril dagger the black cat gave her at Gelan. "Why? Why did you kill everyone?! How could you do that?!"

"I—I..."

"You wanted to be king that much?! Is being king that great?! I don't get it. I don't understand!"

Forgetting to speak politely, she shouted and sobbed like a child her age.

With tears flowing down her face, she gripped the deadly weapon even tighter.

"And that's why I want to destroy him."

The flow of what she was saying had broken, but the animosity burning in her chest was real. So she pushed past Terios, who stood in her way, and

approached the target of her hate.

A bony hand gripped her shoulder to stop her.

“You can’t. If you kill him, then his wife or children will resent you. And if his wife or children slay you, then Torio will fall under anger’s influence. The cycle continues forever,” said Terios.

“Which is why you swore never to take a life.”

“Yes. Peace doesn’t lie at the end of all that killing. That’s what I learned when I was murdered.”

“Really?” She grinned slightly, pleased to understand him a little better by learning how he had died. But that didn’t erase the hate she felt toward the prime minister. “Teacher, Momma, and everyone else who died, what should I do now?”

“Let it go.” He didn’t hesitate a single moment as he replied to Mira’s question. “Eat delicious food, listen to funny stories, play with the other children, study sometimes, learn magic, do lots of what you like to do, be happy, and let go of your hate.”

“You’re not saying I should forgive him?” asked Mira, surprised by the somewhat unexpected answer, and Terios nodded thoroughly.

“Humans aren’t gods. They can’t love every other human, and they can’t forgive every sin.”

“It’s not like the gods are that kind or forgiving, either. Or wait—was there only one god?” added the black cat, like she’d seen for herself, but Terios ignored her and squeezed Mira’s shoulders.

“It is perfectly fine if you never, in your entire life, forgive the prime minister for taking away the people precious to you. But please just let it go and live blissfully.”

Removing all thoughts of the person you hate from your mind, not ruminating on the past and instead living your life looking forward. It was an admirable sentiment. However—

“I can’t, Teacher.”

Tears spilled from Mira's eyes, and she brushed Terios's hands away from her shoulders.

"Because if I don't end him here, then he'll just keep on living, right?"

Her mother was dead. She was no longer in this world.

"He'll be eating delicious food and listening to funny stories and playing with his family and living happily, right?"

He'd probably forget all about the people he killed and live happily.

"There's no way I can let that go."

For as long as she lived, the faintest reminder would force Mira to remember. The flames of her hate would never die out, and they would eventually grow into a murderous blaze. Whether it was today or tomorrow or twenty years from now, her hands would be covered in blood someday. The end result wouldn't change.

"And that's why I'm going to kill him."

Mira closed her hand around the hilt of the mithril dagger again and advanced toward the prime minister.

"Ah!"

"You won't die with dignity, will you?"

Gelan shrieked in the face of animosity he'd never expected from a child and tried to run, but Diné grappled him in place.

Mira approached the prime minister's unprotected chest.

"I wanted to be the one to cut him down, but I guess I can't say no if it's a survivor from the village like you instead," said Diné.

"Sorry." Though Mira apologized, she had expected Diné to oppose a child killing someone. It wasn't a pretty sight.

Diné gave Mira a stern look and stated solemnly, "Age is irrelevant when it comes to death on the battlefield."

"...Okay."

“If you’re going to stab him in the chest, hold the blade flat. That way, the ribs won’t stop the blade.”

“Okay.”

Mira was grateful for Diné’s advice; she wasn’t looking down on her for being a child but was instead acknowledging her as another human being. She adjusted her blade.

“S-sto—!”

Gelan tried to beg for his life at this point, but Diné clamped her hand over his mouth to stop him.

All that was left was for Mira to plunge the dagger into his heart, and her revenge would be complete. She could finally let go of her hate by wiping the man who had killed the people she loved from this world.

But just as she was about to take the last step, she heard Terios’s quiet voice.

“If you kill that man, I will abandon my dream.”

“...Teacher?” Mira turned back, unable to ignore him.

Instead of criticizing her, he was just looking back at her gently.

“I am your teacher. If a child I am teaching killed someone, it would be no different than doing it myself. Hence, I would have to give up my life’s work of building a peaceful world without killing anyone.”

“Teacher?!”

“Well, I’m already dead, so I suppose it would be my death’s work?” Terios was still joking at a time like this, even though Mira let out an upset shriek.

But his eyes showed how entirely serious he was.

“But if you give up, then you...”

What if he worked toward a peaceful world but also accepted killing? No, that wouldn’t work. It had already failed once. That’s why Terios had become undead and chose the difficult path of unifying the continent without killing anyone.

His life’s work had failed, and if he had to give up his death’s work, too, then

—

“I don’t want that!” Mira exclaimed involuntarily.

“Then let go of the dagger,” he said, reaching out a white, bony hand. “Let go of your hate and live happily with me.”

It was a threat disguised as kindness. Giving up on her revenge. He was forcing a cruel decision on her, telling her to throw away her feelings for the dead and departed and hold on to her feelings for the dead who still remained.

“You’re being unfair!”

“Yes, I know.”

Though he knew how horrible this threat of his was, even Mira’s insults didn’t change his convictions.

“I’m sorry, but I swore never to kill another human being again.”

They were the same words he’d told her the night they’d first met. But this time, Mira knew they didn’t contain selfless goodwill. They were filled with boundless selfishness.

Still, Terios was the reason Mira could laugh. He had made it so she could still live and smile.

“I can’t betray you,” she said.

She didn’t want to repay his kind act with her cruel one—no, she just didn’t want him to hate her.

Her tight grip on the mithril dagger loosened, and it fell to the floor.

“But, but still, I won’t stand for it!”

There was no way she could allow the prime minister to live without a care in the world after he had taken the people who were most precious to her.

If Mira let this go, she might someday grow to hate Terios, and that frightened her. And so, while her throat caught from the tears spilling down her face, she entreated him.



“Kill him without killing him, please.”

It was a contradiction. Even Mira didn't know what she was saying.

However, Terios wiped away her tears with a bony finger, his flaming blue eyes narrowed, and he nodded with a smile.



EPILOGUE | The Undead King and the White Maiden

On a bright and sunny day, a huge crowd of citizens gathered in the square in the middle of the capital. Each one of them stared uneasily at the tall wooden platform erected there—an execution stand.

“Is King Calyx going to be executed soon?”

“That’s crazy! No matter what crime he committed, how could Gelan execute his own nephew? He’s still only eleven years old!”

“Besides, most of what the prime minister said about King Calyx destroying that village were probably lies...”

While their hearts ached, there was nothing they could do. They lamented their powerlessness as a squad of soldiers approached from the castle.

But the moment the people saw the figure on a horse leading that squad, their eyes opened wide in shock.

“Lady Diné?! I thought she was dead...”

“I knew a monster hadn’t really killed her!”

The people cheered at the sight of the kingdom’s protector, the descendant of a god, her red hair flowing as she gallantly approached.

Their jubilant cries gave way to gasps of shock as they saw who she was dragging along with a rope.

“Gelan?!?”

Just a few days ago, Prime Minister Gelan had chased out the young king Calyx and declared himself the new monarch. Now his hands were bound like a criminal’s as he was dragged onward.

“Wh-what is this about...?”

While the citizens stood there in disbelief, Diné pulled Gelan up onto the execution stand. She addressed the people watching with rapt attention, her voice amplified by mana.

“You have all probably heard from this man that King Calyx betrayed the

kingdom and unleashed a fearsome disease. However, that was naught but lies. That's because Gelan lusted so intensely for the crown that he destroyed Krio Village with the green rot!"

"What?!"

To depose Calyx and become king, Gelan had plotted to eliminate the holy knight who stood in his way. He had used a green-rot-infected monster to destroy Krio Village in an attempt to lure Diné out and kill her with the disease.

"While I was off fighting a monster, this man led a shameless coup and stole the throne from King Calyx. But he made one miscalculation. As you can see, I am not dead!"

"Oooh, Lady Diné's incredible as always!"

The people all cheered at the sight of Diné, composed and proud.

"With the assistance of a traveling magic user I met around that time, I rescued His Majesty from his imprisonment and exposed this traitor's crimes!"

She epitomized the knight in shining armor who defeats the villain and saves the imprisoned princess—trivial details about their genders aside, the same story known and loved by many had otherwise played out in real life.

That's exactly why the citizens accepted Diné's story without any serious questions. The reality had been far more complicated. No one would expect that an Undead King had been involved.

"This man betrayed his nephew, his own kin, and even killed the citizens he swore to protect, all to sate his own desire for the throne. What is an appropriate punishment for this man?!"

The people started shouting angrily in response to Diné's question.

"The death sentence!"

"Kill him!"

"He can't get away with this!"

Their rage didn't stem only from his betrayal. Among the crowd were people with friends and relatives from Krio Village.

“How could he?! My aunt, my uncle!”

“Make him suffer as much as everyone who died!”

Their hate turned to a wave of animosity and struck Gelan as he trembled.

For a brief moment, contradictory emotions flashed across Diné’s face as she watched the people, but she turned her expression stony again and drew the holy blade.

“Let the gods judge evildoers. Erupt, Vulcanus!”

Diné’s blade burned red-hot, and two knights beside her forced Gelan down as he struggled, exposing his neck.

“Know that the mercy of His Majesty, King Calyx, allowed you to die by the honor of the blade of the God of Fire. Now, descend to the afterlife!”

With her last words, she brought down the holy blade, and the head of the prime minister, the former king’s younger brother, rolled.

There was no unsightly spray of red blood because the flame of the blade had immediately cauterized the wound. But the severed head still rolled away from its body and fell from the execution platform. The crowd rejoiced in unison.

At that moment, a middle-aged man in the crowd stood frozen, staring at the execution of Prime Minister Gelan—or at least the execution of something that looked exactly like Gelan.

“Impossible...”

After some treatment he didn’t want to think about, he had been locked away in the jail. Eventually, he was released and brought to this square, where he witnessed everything that had just happened.

A knight scooped up the head and held it aloft for the seething crowd to see. The thing bore the same face he’d seen every day in the mirror.

“Did I...die?”

Gelan couldn’t help but touch his own neck, but obviously, his head was still connected to his body. But above the neck was a visage that didn’t resemble the executed prime minister’s at all.

While he stood rooted to the ground, Diné responded to the cheers, ordered the knights accompanying her to take care of the body, then withdrew.

Finished with watching the public execution, the crowd slowly started to dissipate.

“That Gelan bastard was the worst of the worst. I bet he was doing all sorts of nastiness in the shadows that was just as bad.”

“I’m terrified to think what would have happened if someone like him had stayed king.”

“But he’s dead now. The country will surely heal.”

The people spoke ill of the dead prime minister, their expressions cheerful as they returned to their homes and jobs.

With that, Prime Minister Gelan was dead to everyone—and to the Erythron Kingdom. The only one who knew the truth was a nameless man who still hadn’t budged.

“W-wait! I-I’m not dead!”

“What?”

A group of young men on their way home stopped and looked at the man as he suddenly started shouting.

“What’s wrong, sir?”

“It’s me. I’m—”

The moment Gelan tried to tell the younger men his name, his body stiffened like stone and refused to let his words escape. The terrifying Undead King had placed a geas on Gelan that prevented him from ever speaking his name again.

“Ah, gah...”

“What is it?”

“He’s drunk. Hey, we should go get a drink in celebration, too.”

The man stood there, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. The young men stared with suspicious confusion, then quickly turned and left.

Others were the same. Gelan wasn't garbed in the extravagant clothing any would expect of the prime minister. No one thought twice about the middle-aged man who looked like any other commoner you might find.

That's right—Gelan was a commoner now. He'd lost his status, face, and previous name, so everyone saw him as nothing more than a regular person.

On top of that, his former self had just been publicly executed. It would be impossible for him to speak his name or for anyone to call him by his name for the rest of eternity.

"I am, I aaaaam—!"

The man screamed, having lost everything but his life. The people around him regarded him suspiciously and passed quickly to avoid getting involved.

As the wave of people began to fade, Gelan also disappeared somewhere into the city.



Terios, Mira, and the black cat had seen the whole thing from the highest floor of the castle. They had watched as Diné executed Prime Minister Gelan—or the fake, rather. Days earlier, Terios had used the body of a man who'd died in an accident to make the fake by changing the body into a homunculus, then making it move with Create Flesh Golem.

"And now the prime minister is dead, but the man still lives," muttered Terios quietly, telling Mira that he'd killed Gelan without killing him, just as she'd asked.

"It's pretty horrible torture to make him live without his face or name. It'd be more merciful to end his life and release him from his misery." Mira spoke as if she pitied Gelan; the grin on her face told a different story.

As they spoke, Mira stared down silently at the square.

"....."

"Are you satisfied?"

"...Yes."

The girl nodded slightly in response to Terios's quiet question.

Even so, she wasn't entirely convinced.

While Gelan was likely suffering a fate worse than death, the person she loathed so much she wanted to kill him was still alive. Forgiving him wouldn't be easy.

However, Mira had already decided to let it go. She didn't search for the man somewhere in the square and instead looked up at Terios.

"Teacher, what are you going to do now?"

"Hmm, I've been debating that." Terios held his head in his hand. "The truth is that I had hoped to spend more time slowly getting people accustomed to undead beings like myself and to a new lifestyle where they utilize bone golems for farming and other tasks. But then this coup incident occurred."

The death of the prime minister cleared King Calyx of all suspicion. But Terios worried that the loss of the prime minister, who played a pivotal role in the kingdom, would thrust Erythron Kingdom's inner circle into intense chaos.

"By pinning everything on the prime minister, the general and his men haven't been blamed for the coup, even though they helped carry it out, so all of our concerns haven't disappeared."

Calyx needed the ministers who had once betrayed him to follow him from here on out. While Diné was at his side protecting him, the situation was more severe than it might have been had the prime minister remained in power.

"I have to do something about this, don't I?" asked Terios.

"If you don't do anything, the country will probably collapse from the inside before long," speculated the black cat with a huge smile, agreeing with Terios even though he really wanted someone to offer dissent. "That virgin lady's strong, and she's not that dumb, either. But she doesn't seem equipped to fight political battles, and she probably won't ever change her position of supporting the king, right? Plus, Calyx is a total crybaby."

"I know..."

Terios sighed heavily. This state of affairs brought on the prime minister's coup in the first place. The matter of Calyx's weakness still remained.

It was unlikely that another coup would succeed, not with Diné keeping an eye out. But the holy knight's holy blade couldn't defend against the king's retainers losing their drive or from them abandoning the Erythron Kingdom and defecting to another country.

"Don't you think this country will quickly fall to ruin if no one takes on the responsibility of the kingdom for that crybaby?"

"Huh...?" Mira's face paled at the black cat's negative outlook for the kingdom. "This country is going to disappear?!"

"Well, I can't say there's absolutely no chance it will...," clarified Terios, replying vaguely as Mira clung to him.

The prime minister was blinded by his own ambition and led a coup. If only he hadn't done that..., thought Terios.

There was still one glaring question out of this whole issue that hadn't been answered. Where in the world did the prime minister obtain monsters as dangerous as a wererat contaminated with green rot and the Throne, a disciple of a god no longer in this world?

Those monsters had spells cast on them to make them obey humans. I don't think that's something he could have gotten in the Erythron Kingdom.

It was a small rural country in the far northeastern corner of the continent. There weren't any magic users powerful enough to force monsters into submission, and there weren't any ancient ruins that hid treasures with powerful magic.

He must have gotten them from another country—I can only imagine that Xanthos in the south was involved.

In other words, this incident was a plot by a foreign power to weaken the Erythron Kingdom so they could get a foothold in the country to conquer them.

It didn't matter if the prime minister's plan succeeded or failed. Either way, the country would plunge into chaos and become an easy mark. A truly nasty strategy.

Whoever had concocted the plan was cunning. They weren't going to sit idly

by. If Terios and company didn't pull the country together and get it ready for war before that person made their move, the Erythron Kingdom would certainly be destroyed.

"Ohhh nooo, if the country is destroyed, the children in Krio Village will face sooo much hardship! Is there aaanyone who can take the prime minister's place?"

"Grrr...!"

As she whined innocently, the black cat kept glancing over at Terios with a wicked smile. He couldn't help gritting his teeth.

"I thought I'd failed last time because I had to rush while I was still alive. I thought I could take it slow and steady this time. Why isn't it going as planned...?" lamented Terios.

"That's obviously because you're blessed by Lady Luck."

"No, I'm most definitely cursed by her!" he snapped, taking his anger out on the cat, who was smiling like she was relishing every minute of it.

Mira put her hand to her mouth and laughed as she watched them.

"Hee-hee, I'm a little jealous of how close you two are."

"No way. We're not close."

"My, so cruel."

Terios denied Mira's statement immediately, but the cat tapped his cheekbone in an overly affectionate manner with her tail.

"Teacher, sometimes you're unfair and scary, but I think you really are a kind person. Because you won't abandon us or the country," complimented Mira.

"Well, I've sworn to build a peaceful world and started acting on that, so I'll do everything I can," replied Terios.

He'd never considered the option of throwing it all away and starting again. He'd seen many enemies make a habit of fleeing from battle. It kept them from fighting to the end and had ultimately sealed their doom.

But Mira didn't think much of Terios's actions because she didn't know

anything about his past. She just gave him a wide, joyous grin.

“I love how serious you are, too,” she said.

“Thank you.”

Terios wasn't ashamed to have a pretty girl tell him she liked something about him, blushing as she did.

“Oh my, I suppose you'd expect a man who had lain with seven wives in his time to have a little more wiggle room than a certain cherry boy.”

“...Teacher?”

“Mira, please calm down. What happened while I was alive has nothing to do with who I am today. Besides, they've all already died.”

Taking out the mithril dagger when the black cat let the cat out of the bag, Mira's expression suddenly clouded over. Terios tried desperately to get her to listen.

“Ha-ha-ha, looks like your lady problems aren't over even now that you're a skeleton!”

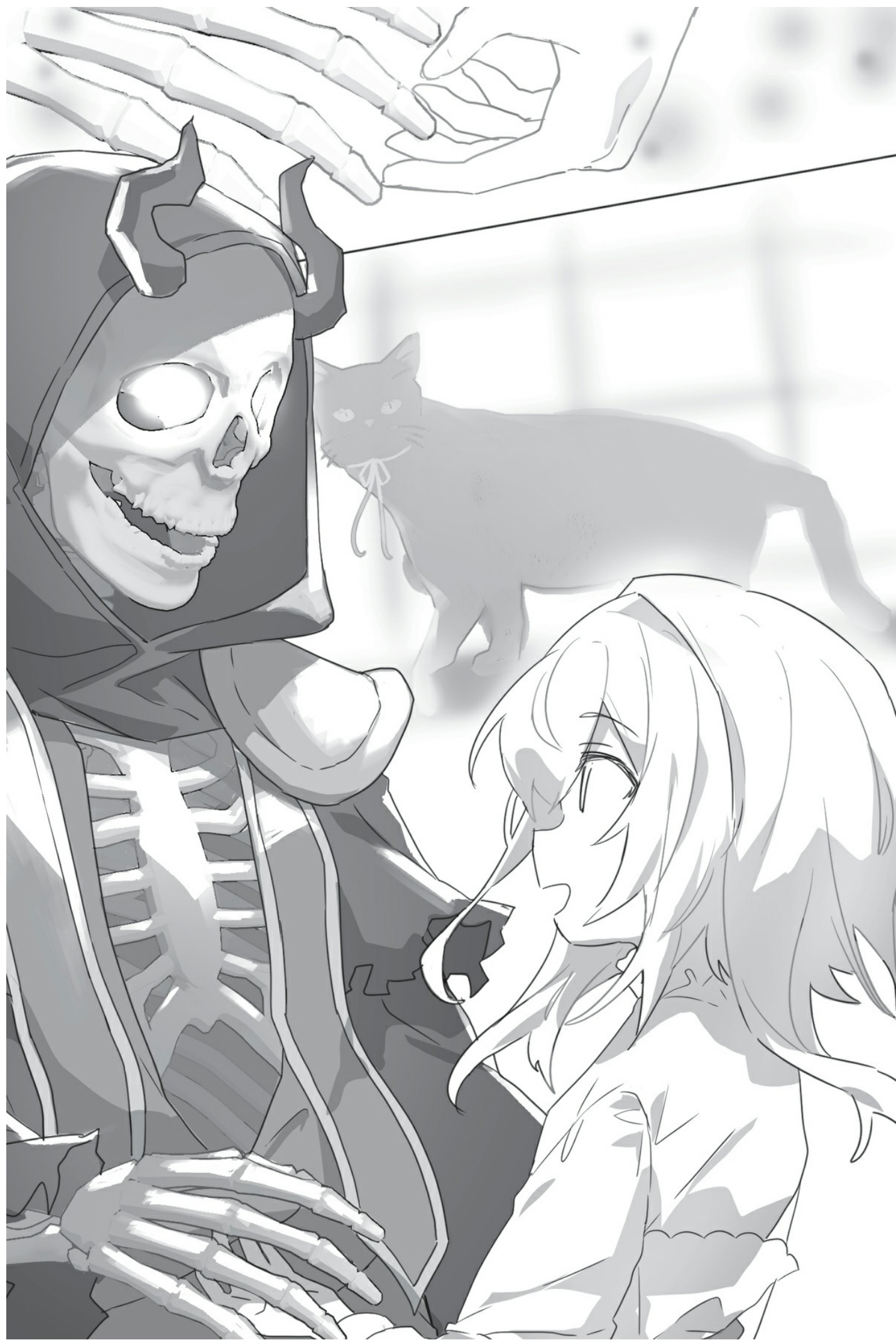
“And whose big mouth made this happen?!” shouted Terios angrily again at the audacity of the root of all evil.

Their hilarious exchange cheered Mira up. She smiled again, then said, “Teacher, please do your best to make a world where people can live peacefully, without going through the pain that we have.”

“I will, I promise.”

Mira held out her small hand, and Terios squeezed it in his bony one.

Thus their fates were intertwined. An Undead King who became such after a lifetime of committing massacres, then swore to never kill again, and a maiden who would continue to dye her white hair fresh with blood on his behalf.





AFTERWORD



Hello to all my Famitsu Bunko readers. Sakuma Sasaki here, with a horrible impression of immortality thanks to Osamu Tezuka's masterpiece *Phoenix*.

Humans can't build a peaceful world. If that's the case, then an artificial intelligence beyond humans— Well, that's the theme in many sci-fi stories. I've taken that and put a fantasy spin on it to write this work.

A peaceful world is a goal that would normally be incredibly difficult to attain, and when you add on the additional condition of not killing anyone, it sounds like a video game that's impossible to beat.

But if you give up on your dreams before even starting because you think they're impossible, and you don't even try, they'll never come true.

I hope that you all enjoy, at least a little bit, our main character, who struggles even more in death.

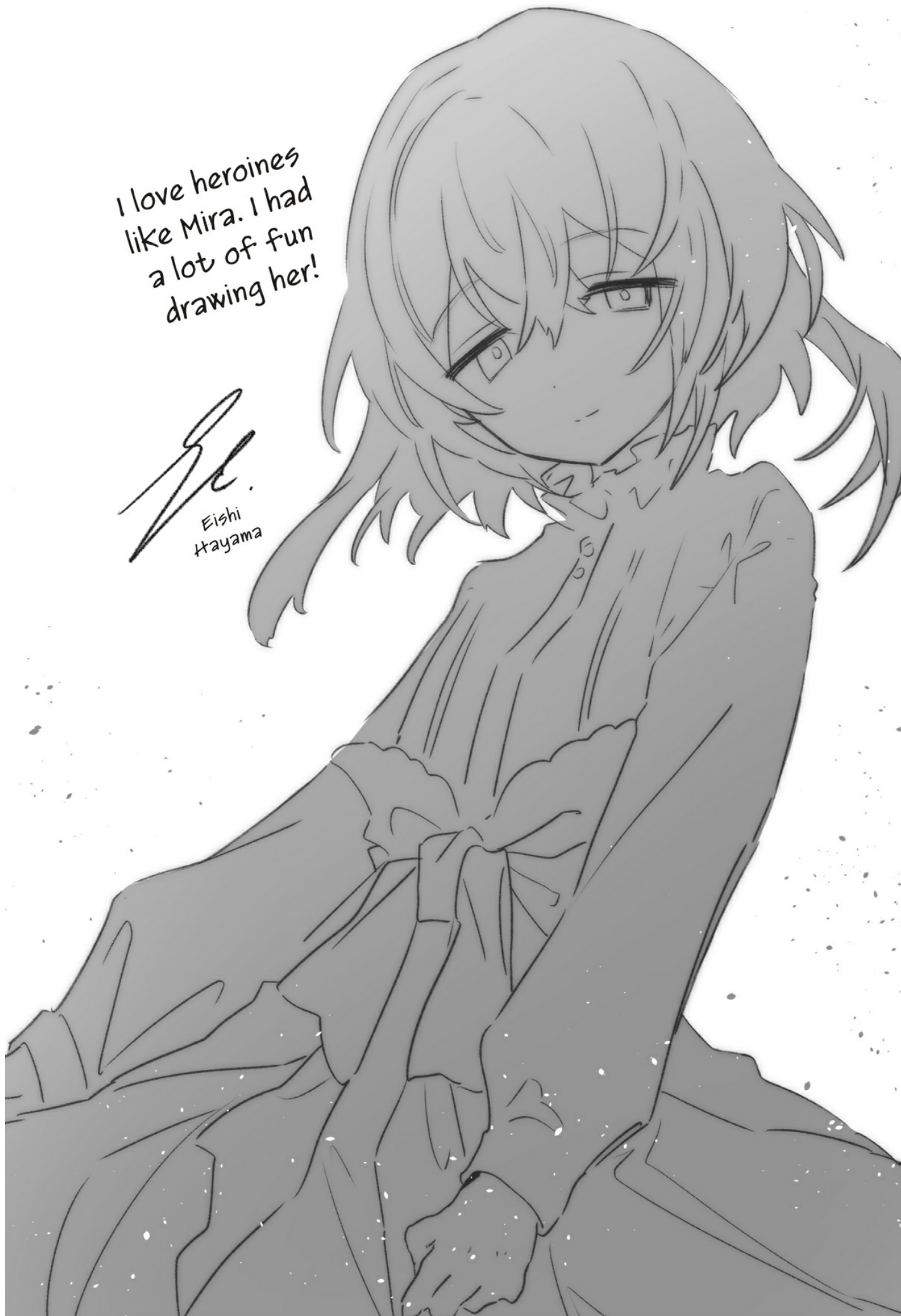
Right, I'm running out of space now, so on to my customary thank-yous.

A thanks to Eishi Hayama for breathing life into the characters with their wonderful illustrations. Thank you to my editor, Miko Gibuki, who continues to help me with this work. Thank you to the proofreader, typesetters, and everyone else involved for working hard in these difficult COVID-19 times. And of course, I would like to close off with a huge thanks to all my readers.

April 2020, Sakuma Sasaki

I love heroines
like Mira. I had
a lot of fun
drawing her!


Eishi
Hayama



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